

# COLLAPSE

Philosophical Research and Development

VOLUME IV



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## COLLAPSE IV

Published in 2008 in an edition of 1000  
comprising numbered copies 1-950  
and 50 *hors-commerce* copies.

Electronic version published in 2009

ISBN 978-0-9553087-3-4

Published by Urbanomic,  
The Old Lemonade Factory  
Windsor Quarry  
Falmouth  
TR11 3EX  
United Kingdom

Printed by Athenæum Press

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VOLUME IV

*Edited by*

Robin Mackay



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# COLLAPSE IV

May 2008

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## COLLAPSE III

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# Editorial Introduction

Robin Mackay

Surveying a century in which experience has taught us that man is capable of inventing ever more atrocious forms of violence and horror, is it necessary to remark that much of modern thought offers little to soothe, and much to exacerbate our disquiet? Nietzsche famously observed that the psychic well-being of the human organism is predicated, minimally, upon a drastically partial perspective, and ultimately upon untruth. Human cognitive defaults continue to cry out against the insights which modern physics, cosmology, genetics, neuroscience, psychoanalysis and the rest seem to require us to integrate into our worldview. As for philosophy, it has largely replaced wonder, awe, and the drive to certainty with dread, anxiety and finitude. Moreover, despite the diverse technological wonders they have made possible, the modern sciences offer little existential respite: There is no consolation in the claim that (for instance) I am the contingent product of evolution, or a chance formation of elementary particles, or that my ‘self’ is

nothing but the correlate of the activation of neurobiological phase-spaces. Yet mundane thought, whether through obstinacy or inertia, maintains its stubborn course regardless, as if oblivious to their consequences, or at most allowing them to subsist at a safely delimited, solely theoretical level.

What if, prising the more disturbing elements of modern thought loose from their comfortable framing as part of an intellectual canon, we were to become fully attentive to their most harrowing consequences? What if, impatient with a consideration of their claims solely from the point of view of their explanatory power and formal consistency, we yielded to the (perhaps ‘unphilosophical’) temptation to experiment with their potentially corrosive effects upon lived experience? If the overriding affect connected with what we ‘know’ – but still do not really *know* – about the universe and our place in it, would be one of horror, then, inversely, how might the existing literature of horror inform a reading of these tendencies of contemporary thought?

These are some of the questions with which this volume of **COLLAPSE** sets out to grapple, imagining for a moment a philosophy absolved of humanistic responsibilities, devoting itself to the experimental marshalling of all possible resources in the service of a transformation that would no longer be circumscribed within the bounds of the purely theoretical, and thus striking an alliance with those affects which, for the most part elided, nonetheless haunt philosophical thought like its very shadow. A philosophy, then, bound to experiment with the employment of horror, that its insights might begin slowly but effectively to erode anthropic automatism.

Such experiments are already being undertaken – not for the most part by philosophers, but by those working in literature and the arts who, drawing upon the resources of modern thought, have devised means by which to produce *experiences* of the conceptual upheavals characteristic of the post-Enlightenment age. It is the scenarios of weird and horror fiction, the excessive existential sufferings of literature, the abstract emotional engineering of sound-art and music, and the poetical extrapolations of artists, that are apt to put us in the place of individuals set loose from the protective envelope of consensual reality, forced to integrate directly the lacerating force of thoughts usually blunted (even – or, sad to say, *especially* – in philosophical discourse) by the knowledge that they are, after all, ‘*only* thoughts’. It is through them that we identify ourselves with tormented individuals compelled – even if only momentarily – to *live the problem* of the rational corrosion of our cherished self-image, to viscerally absorb thoughts ‘whose merest mention is paralysing’ (Lovecraft).

In the twentieth century, SF, weird fiction, and horror in particular have furnished a laboratory for shaping narratives pointedly informed by the conceptual paradoxes produced by modern science and philosophy. And increasingly, philosophy itself, and the high arts which so long looked with disdain upon such pulp fictions, are realising with what anticipatory clarity these genres have formulated problematics which are becoming ever more pressing, not only conceptually and aesthetically, but even politically (given what is at stake in our maintenance of a naïve, comfortable self-image even as the most speculative theoretical insights are immediately and ruthlessly operationalised throughout the sociopolitical and commercial spheres, from advertising to healthcare, from warfare to banking).

Given this discursive intersection between the attempt to rethink reality through contemporary science and philosophy, and the tropes of the horror 'genre', then, there is a certain logic in examining together conceptual armature and artistic dramatisation. It was this double-edged approach that we decided to take in the present volume, by bringing together contributions from authors of weird fiction, artists, and philosophers – only to discover ourselves vindicated by the impossibility of determining where the concept ends and the horror begins. The theme thus presented an opportunity to bring more fully to fruition **COLLAPSE's** vision of an integration of elements originating from very different spheres, mutually catalysing so as to produce a series of conceptual 'interzones'.

**GEORGE SIEG's** contribution ably demonstrates how, in examining the nature of horror as an affect, a rich intersection of cognitive, conceptual, existential and political stakes comes into view. Firstly, unlike the essentially animal responses of fear and terror, horror attaches especially to the conceptual abstraction and reflexivity attendant upon self-consciousness – which is as much as to say that *homo philosophicus* is defined by a capacity for feeling horror. As Sieg argues, horror is characterised more through its victims than through its predators, and the victim's itinerary is always that from innocence to knowledge. Corollary to this is the impossibility of flight to a 'critical' position on horror, since it is 'always already' (even such hoary philosophical locutions reveal a menacing aspect here ...) the horror of *knowing* horror – whence Sieg's characterisation of horror as peculiarly 'gnostic' (thus introducing a recurrent theme of this volume).

Sieg locates the historical kernel of horror in the endotropic amplification of an anthropological

commonplace – the Zoroastrian concept of *druj* as xenophobia turned inward. However, in order for horror to flower, he emphasises, another element is necessary – a thoroughgoing materialism, in which the knowledge of non-apparent conceptual distinction – the sensitivity towards hidden otherness – is prevented from diffusing into mysticism: The very birth, one might say, of the distinction between philosophy and religion, is also the birth of horror. It is this compaction, suggests Sieg, which finally blocks all exit from a self-referential universe pregnant with horror and yet (or precisely because it is) entirely rational – a universe in which the innocent victim is defenceless before the monstrous knowledge which invades them.

In his contribution **EUGENE THACKER** details how theology has, nevertheless, maintained a consistent historical relation to horror. His 'Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror' examines the extent to which the concept of 'life' owes its integrity to an immanent 'after-life' which is the proper object of horror. If life is defined by a duplicity – the distinction between the living being and life 'itself' – then, according to Thacker's historical survey of the 'teratological noosphere', in the undertow of the questioning of life we always find changing conceptualizations of afterlife, whose horrific avatars are so many embodiments (or disembodiments) of this problematic duplicity. They provide us with a handle on a fundamental question of biopolitics in its varying historical forms: The suppression of the after-life immanent to life, whose horror reveals that which is already there prior to individual lives, the anonymous Levinasian 'there is' which, Thacker argues, is 'a point of attraction for ontology' – in Thacker's coinage, a 'nouminous' (both noumenal and numinous) life. However as Thacker's 'disputations' deepen, the 'always-receding horizon' of the

concept of life leads him to a more radical consideration of 'life as non-being', or the horror of 'life-without-Being'.

In their 'Czech Forest' cycle, Prague artist collective **RAFANI** take an oblique approach to confronting a horrifying episode in their national history. Although at their birth Rafani announced themselves through overtly political manifestos, by addressing this suppressed event through a reappropriation of folk art, 'Czech Forest' displays a keen ability to navigate the borders of the political, the mythical and the aesthetic. In doing so, it adds a supplement to George Sieg's argument that horror has its roots in xenophobia and the fear of the 'enemy within'.

At the end of the Second World War, Czech inhabitants of the now-liberated Sudetenland turned on neighbouring Germans, whose families in some cases had inhabited the forest region for over a century, and drove them out with vengeful ferocity. The slogans reproduced in Rafani's iconic images (from the 'Unofficial Decalogue of Czech Soldiers in the Borderland', a propaganda handbook published at the time) demonstrate starkly enough how this triumphalist convulsion relayed the horrors suffered under occupation, revisiting them once more upon the innocent. But the 'Czech forest' of the title also conducts a deeper current: the Forest, as fairy-tale locus of darkness, where children get lost, monsters lurk, and, at dusk, branch and leaf become menacingly animate. By subtly adapting the folk-art-inspired woodcuts that often illustrate such tales, Rafani's work connects the transmutation of the rage of the oppressed into xenophobic hatred, with the mythopoetic roots of fear, thus transforming the story from national history into psychogeographical fable of horror: it becomes a reminder of what lurks beneath the comfort of homeliness, and of the horror of the internal other.

Graham Harman's emblematic invocation of 'the electrons that form the pulpy torso of Great Cthulhu' reminds us that the hard-nosed materialism that is a prerequisite for the emergence of horror finds its equally necessary counterpart in the polysemic qualifier 'pulp'. Historically describing the re-formed, low-grade paper used to manufacture magazines carrying what was, and to some extent still is, considered low-grade and derivative literature, including fantastic fiction and comics, 'pulp' came to apply also to the latter's supposedly 'generic' nature. More than coincidentally, it also sits well with what **CHINA MIÉVILLE** nominates, in his contribution, the 'new (Weird) haptic' – a certain 'palpability' associated with horror and whose avatar, Miéville proposes, is that exemplarily 'formless' creature, the octopus – *le poulpe*. Himself a contemporary giant of weird fiction, and an unashamed champion of pulp, in his essay Miéville clearly demonstrates that an attentive reading of the history of the fantastic underpins his fiction. He undertakes to extract from their various historical combinations and scissions the two currents of the weird and the 'hauntological'. Taking the 'skulltopus' and its 'extreme rarity [...] in culture' as an indicator that the coexistence of the two genres makes them no less inviolably distinct, Miéville argues that, if the rise of the weird belongs to 'crisis-blasted modernity' – the enlightenment become dark – and if in contemporary capitalism we *live* the weird, we are also haunted by ghosts of futures that never happened: the superposed temporalities of the genres expressing the tensions of post-modernity.

Disabusing us of any suspicion that the link between horror and philosophical thought is a purely modern invention, **REZA NEGARESTANI's** contribution recounts

how a certain hideously ingenious torture was no sooner historically recorded than its most gruesome details were employed as a conceptual resource for philosophical meditation. Building on a fragment from a lost work by Aristotle, 'The Corpse Bride' launches a necrophilic investigation into the idea of ontology as a system of metaphysical cruelty which reveals vitalism to be a 'farce' played out among the remains of the already-dead.

In imbuing a famous Etruscan torture with universal pertinence, Negarestani's Aristotle becomes a prophet of terror, insistent that any intelligible ontology as such mobilises non-belonging (or nothing) through the agency of a chain of putrefactory ratios or problematic intimacies with the dead. Aristotle assimilates the bond between soul and body with the bond between corpse and living victim, wherein only the differential layer of blackening or *nigredo* can properly be called 'life'. Yet in Negarestani's argument, even this chemistry of horror is only a preface to a deeper bond with the void which Aristotle seeks to dissimulate. The final twist in Negarestani's investigation, in which the glorification of negativity or the subtractive mobilization of non-belonging (Badiou, Žižek, *et al.*) is revealed as an implicit and unconditional affirmation of the radically exterior, adds new and macabre detail to his previous **COLLAPSE** essays on absolute exteriority and 'affordance': survival becomes an art of living with the dead, of maintaining a ratio of intensive decay to extensive putrefaction, of abiding in *nigredo*.

What follows from Negarestani's probing of the problematic conjunction of *nekrous* and *philia*, the dead and the essence of affirmation, reads like a thoroughly perverse twisting of Deleuze's dialectic of problem and solution, and

a retrospective 'blackening' of the history of differential calculus he associates with it: for 'what could be worse for vitalism than at once being animated through a necrophilic alliance, and simultaneously, protected under the aegis of the void'?

The work of **JAKE AND DINOS CHAPMAN** has continually toyed with the cohabitation of horror and laughter, employing the debasement of form and image as a weapon against moral self-certainty. Proof of concept in this respect was achieved in their (2004) 'improvement' of Goya's famous *Disasters of War* through 'rectifications' that yanked the atrocity-victims into a cruelly absurd cartoon universe that addressed the viewer far more intensely and disquietingly than the 'originals' with their patina of historical didacticism and art-historical legitimation.

In the drawings they contribute to our volume, the Chapman brothers continue a preoccupation with the uncannily vacant images of the children's colouring book (see e.g. *Gigantic Fun* [2000], *My Giant Colouring Book* [2004]). In *I Can See*, vulgarised Bataille themes vie with the vacant potency of stereotyped simulacra reproduced for juvenile consumption; the comically brutal irruption into these adumbrated banalities of fragments of body-horror, and an insidious cross-breeding with the Chapmans' own stock of cartoon atrocities, engenders a menacing air of inanity that resists easy decipherment. The artists' programmatic impoverishments, testing the limit at which the image will cease to conduct the craving for improvement, might be read in the light of Negarestani's Aristotelian arithmetic as a willed acceleration of the putrefaction of the form of art, an iterative process of decay which, however, only ever momentarily disturbs the veneration of 'what remains'.

The Chapmans' extended practical joke on the art-world continually subverts any anticipation that a work should supply abreactive or cathartic moral reinforcement through didactically-framed images ('eye-care'?). Instead it invites a jarring and problematic convulsion, an irresolvable *horror vacui*.

If Lovecraft's name resounds throughout this volume, making several of his tales 'required reading' for the collected articles, it often does so through the filter of another work. Hardly a work of 'secondary literature' – despite its biographical form, it is more of a passionate affirmation and exacerbation of Lovecraft's great themes – MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*<sup>1</sup> is one of the few studies to successfully explore the singular qualities of Lovecraft's work. And, as little as it may seem evident at first, reading Houellebecq's own work through his appreciation for Lovecraft reveals a profound influence. Houellebecq's characters too live out the 'unlivable', encountering in heightened form the cosmic horrors which modern society simultaneously unleashes and suppresses; they are individuals who have taken into their very soul the full weight of what we know about our universe and our place within it. Yet unlike Lovecraft's doomed heroes, for the most part Houellebecq's remain trapped within the banal everyday: with no respite even through the negative transcendence of madness, the world becomes a relentless trial, its everyday rituals and objects beacons of desolate horror. Houellebecq's poems – a selection of which we are delighted to include in this volume translated into English for the first time – distil his powerful vision into translucid moments of dread certainty.

1. Trans. D. Khazeni, San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005.

The poems record moments when the obtuse momentum of life draws it momentarily into proximity with the indifference of the universe; they offer no affirmation, no redemption, but only an icy clarity, a kind of conciliation with this indifference. The most innocuous spaces of the everyday ('the insides of cupboards') become abysmal revelations, whilst the empty repetitions of life reveal time as an implacable horror of merciless recurrence 'every day, until the end of the world'.

In his reading of the work of Thomas Ligotti – one of the foremost contemporary exponents of weird fiction – in tandem with the neurophilosophy of Thomas Metzinger, JAMES TRAFFORD argues that the horrifying travails of Ligotti's protagonists give phenomenological expression to insights anticipating those presented in Metzinger's extraordinary treatise *Being No-One*. The latter includes explicitly as one of its goals the achievement of a theory that can be 'culturally integrated';<sup>2</sup> Trafford's suggestion is that such an integration may imply a passage through horrors similar to those described – and generated – by Ligotti's singularly suffocating tales.

Metzinger's central contention is that the apparent immediacy or transparency of phenomenological appearances owes itself to an instrumental miscognition: transparency is in fact a 'special form of darkness'. Ligotti's fiction, premised upon the catastrophic undoing of this miscognition, this protective opacity, documents the experience of the unravelling of selfhood.

Sieg argues that the monster is a less indispensable element of the horror genre than the victim, and it is the victims in Ligotti's fictions, in their plumbing of the depths

2. T. Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (London: MIT Press, 2004).

of a 'spinning abyss' (recalling the 'layers within layers of horrific depravity' revealed to Sieg's gnostics) that Trafford sees as revealing the dark truth of Metzinger's 'nemocentrism'.

In his own contribution, **THOMAS LIGOTTI** demonstrates that not only is self-consciousness a precondition for horror, the two are inextricable. 'Thinking Horror' is thus a pleonasm: the new epoch heralded by the dawn of self-consciousness is characterized by the production of 'horrors [and] flagrantly joyless possibilities' and – swiftly ensuing – the erection of psychic defences against truth, either explicit, socialised, or in the form of commonplace ironies and homely platitudes ('being alive is okay').

If Ligotti's fictions represent so many twisted descents into the void, here it is offered to us neat, in the manner of a classic, if unhinged, essayist, and with a certain humour indissociable from such dismal truths. Eschewing any orientation of his position according to the standard co-ordinates of a philosophical orthodoxy, Ligotti introduces us to the obscure figures who form his secret lineage of pessimism, and invents a pulp philosophy at once bracing for its brutal honesty and perversely enjoyable for its mordant wit.

Whilst much contemporary thought remains doggedly committed to continuing the perennial philosophical battle against mechanism and determinism, focusing increasingly sophisticated conceptual resources on the characterisation of 'singularities' or 'events', Ligotti aligns himself, against the crushing majority of philosophers, with a pessimistic creed which, refusing to imprudently postulate such exceptions, instead assigns itself the sole task of outlining the futility of man's lot and the comical details of his desperate attempts

to think without thinking horror. Ligotti rightly locates the interest of this programme less in its conceptual innovation than in its audacious defiance of the snares of rhetoric and the delights of intellectual sophistication. For, rather than reason, is it not these latter passions which govern more 'sophisticated' philosophical architectonics, and in doing so obscure the conceptual vistas that might open up to those brave or foolhardy enough to interrogate philosophically the 'taboo commonplaces' which they superciliously outlaw?<sup>3</sup> For Ligotti, though, perhaps even such interrogations risk tainting the crystalline clarity of thinkers such as Zapffe and Mainländer, for whom the real question swiftly becomes a practical one – in a reprise of the Gnostic abhorrence of nature and will-to-extinction.

One might of course argue that, even in writing, such thinkers, and Ligotti himself, yield to the tide of life. Even the will to know, to think, and to write, may itself be a sublimated form of the *not knowing* that is crucial to survival. But if thinking and writing can themselves be sources of distraction, a thinking and writing of 'concept horror' attempts to force the reader to secrete something of the poison that is buried within them; it is a kind of demonic invocation. No less than his fictions, Ligotti's straightforward account of our 'malignant uselessness' succeeds in so far as its language – like that of Lovecraft's eldritch incantations – ceases to be representational and begins to summon the very desolate reality it describes, doing away with all cultivated distance and calm objectivity. Ligotti counsels precisely this surreptitious promotion of disillusionment, to be carried out patiently by those in every age to whom it

3. A rare and fine example of such a dispassionate experiment in nihilism is Ray Brassier's recently published *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007). (See also 'The Enigma of Realism' in **COLLAPSE II**, 15-54.)

falls to carry on the bad work, hastening the dissolution of the horrors of consciousness and life, and returning us to the void.

Ligotti's text appears in our volume alongside a series of photographs by **OLEG KULIK**, a Russian artist whose work includes photography and photoassemblage but which culminates in his extraordinary live actions.<sup>4</sup> One of the first artists from post-Soviet Russia to have garnered international attention, Kulik's work thematises the porous boundary between animal and human (a tendency which reached its infamous apex in 'Dog House' [1996] when, exhibiting himself as a chained canine, Kulik was arrested for physically harming and mentally traumatising members of the public who flouted the warning to 'beware of the dog'). As well as extending Kulik's researches into what Mila Bredikhina has called 'zoophrenia',<sup>5</sup> Kulik's 'Memento Mori' complexifies the dialectic of life and death, presenting us with images of creatures who are doubly dead – already corpses, their deaths have been preserved through interment in a museum. Of course, we still cannot help reading their visages as anthropomorphic signifiers, now all the more macabre. Evincing all the stuffed-shirt dignity of victorian portraiture, the photographs could also be read as an extended 'family tree' – an ancestral archive we might prefer to keep in the closet. Not only do they act as 'memento mori', reminding us of the horror of personal death; they also remind us, as does Ligotti, of the senseless and indifferent continuum of life of which we are an insignificant part, and of the absurd folly of our enshrining any part of it, stuffed and preserved, for posterity. Perhaps Kulik thus identifies in advance the museums and

4. See the essential *Oleg Kulik: Art Animal* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2001) for documentation of Kulik's work from 1993-2000.

5. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

commemorative discourses in which his own work is destined to be preserved as cultural mausolea, even as he promotes the simultaneous fascination and horror that the mummified object, in its living death, evokes.

The alternately accusing and mutely questioning faces of the dead monkeys describe a strange twisting associative dance with Ligotti's text, the nuances of dumb bewilderment and silent petition inviting us to identify ourselves simultaneously with Kulik's photographic subjects and the hapless, self-deluding targets of Ligotti's rant. A deeply felt unease, and the troubled laughter that accompanies it, is the inevitable initial response to this marriage of text and image. But ironically, read within the context of Kulik's work, 'Memento Mori' obliquely hints at an egress from Ligotti's dead end. For Kulik's performances seek a zoophrenic overcoming of the limitations of the anthropic through a plunging into the animal. The involvement of 'the point of view of different biological species in aesthetic practice,' the artist proposes, 'will produce a new renaissance'<sup>6</sup> – Since the anthropomorphisation of the animal can only subject it to a further death, we should rather *zoomorphise the human*. This strategy of a 'forward-to-nature'<sup>7</sup> zoofuturism implies that escape from 'the crisis of human schizophrenic culture'<sup>8</sup> might involve intimacy with a horror that walks on four legs – a horror that has left its teeth-marks on witnesses to Kulik's uncompromising and profoundly disturbing animal-becomings.

In this volume we present the final part of a 'trilogy' of essays by **QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX**, which proposes a

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*

wholly different, rationalist, antidote to despair. In previous contributions, Meillassoux presented his thesis of ‘absolute time’ or ‘the necessity of contingency’, founded upon a re-examination of Hume’s problem.<sup>9</sup> In ‘Spectral Dilemma’, he unveils the ethical consequences of the position, introducing the conception of the ‘virtual god’ that lies at the heart of the philosophical system to which the acclaimed *After Finitude*<sup>10</sup> – although a significant intervention in its own right – is a prolegomena. In his meditation on irremediable bereavement, Meillassoux asks, with regard both to the spectres of those whose loss is personal to us, and to those belonging to the atrocities of the last century and which seemingly cannot be dispelled, how it is possible to escape the shadow of such deaths, thus to hope once more. Meillassoux’s answer to this question will surprise many, but undoubtedly constitutes a consistent development from his central philosophical contentions. Identifying the dilemma presented by the theist and atheist responses to the demands of ‘essential mourning’ – namely, that one must hope something for the dead, but that any *existing* god, having to be held responsible for their sufferings, can only be the object of horror and repugnance rather than veneration – Meillassoux shows that the ‘impossible’ conciliation of the parties must be sought through a thinking of the *divine character of inexistence*, which is further expanded into a very particular modal thesis, revealing the solution to the ‘spectral dilemma’ to be a formal counterpart to the speculative-rational solution of Hume’s problem.

9. Q. Meillassoux, ‘Potentiality and Virtuality’, *COLLAPSE* Vol. II (2007), 55-82 and R. Brassier ‘The Enigma of Realism’, 207-34, in the same volume; ‘Subtraction and Contraction’, *COLLAPSE* Vol. III (2007), 63-107.

10. Trans. R. Brassier (London/NY: Continuum, 2008).

Meillassoux presents us here with a foretaste of what he will develop of a *divinology*, in rupture with the very couplet a/theism. But if the question for the bereaved is then no longer that of having enough time to mourn, but of *what type* of time, then, glancing forward to **BENJAMIN NOYS**’ reading of Lovecraft’s conception of time, we might wonder whether the god who is to come, but whose arrival depends upon a lawless ‘hyperchaos’, is not destined to visit upon its devotees a ‘*Horror Temporis*’ more terrible still than the dilemma from which it frees them. Inspired by Meillassoux’s conception of ‘absolute time’, Noys suggests that, if (as Harman argues) the comparison between Lovecraft and Kant does not hold good, at least one affinity between them may yet be attested: in the introduction into weird fiction of the affect corresponding to the ‘empty form of time’. Time, released from its anthropocentric cycles, becomes unhinged and threatening in its indifference to humanity; fully purified, as in Meillassoux, of sufficient reason, it implies a ‘suspension of natural laws’. Invoking the ‘arche-fossil’ as emblem of cosmic temporal disquiet, Noys notes that the Meillassouxian universe, freed from the yoke of the Principle of Sufficient Reason by a time whose vicissitudes are not even ameliorated by lawfulness, carries the Lovecraftian implication of a ‘material “outside” responding to no law’, a truly ‘unmasterable’ god – it is the universe of *Azathothic materialism*, releasing us ‘into the experience of the horror of [...] the seething vortex of time’. And, as we know, those of Lovecraft’s protagonists who fall under the eldritch shadow of beings hailing from this ‘outside’, far from finding their hope replenished, finish traumatised and deranged. Given the trajectory of ‘irrealism’ which accompanies the discovery of *horror temporis*, Noys concludes fittingly by showing how Peaslee’s ‘researches’, unsatisfactorily abridged

in the ending of Lovecraft's tale, might be completed from the perspective of a contemporary philosophy of the real which reveals time itself as the 'shadow'.

German artist **TODOSCH**<sup>11</sup> (whose work, like that of Oleg Kulik, has involved an uncanny intimacy with the animal: one of his live actions, connected with the infamous 'Hundetunnel' project in Chicago,<sup>12</sup> involved implanting dog fangs into his mouth for a year) produces work which seems to invite myths and/or rationalisations whilst simultaneously repelling them: How to 'explain' live actions causing great public inconvenience and stress-testing public reaction (various Sisyphean labours including dragging six carriages of scrap through the streets from Berlin to the Hanover Expo); fictional institutions (*Das Falten von Böhmen*, *Conscious Force*) which realise themselves through an exhaustive documentary archive; or the painstaking production of strange objects (cute pokemon-like critters that turn out to have been carved from Carrera marble) like fetishes of a classical alien culture? A part of their disarraying force, and the irresistible desire to quell it with some narrative, results from a forced confrontation with the brute materiality of the heterogeneous matter that surrounds us but whose opacity and intractability are systematically suppressed through commodification and habituation. Refusing to make it serve him, as an artist Todosch repeatedly takes the burden of (physical, informational, cultural) 'stuff' upon himself. The drawings which he contributes to this volume of **COLLAPSE** might be understood both as a depiction and a channeling of this heterogeneous, cloacal, sinewy, abstract matter. The 'stuff' is never quite recognisable, but is recognisably

11. A.K.A. Thorsten Schlopsnies. See <http://todosch.felix-werner.net/>

12. See 'Thorsten Schlopsnies – Todosch', in *Umelec* 2, 2005, 51-4.

*impure*, and evidently in the process either of coagulation or of decomposition – a research study from one of Todosch's fictitious institutions, *The Institute for Recycling Reality*?

Quite apart from the general ineptitude attacked by Graham Harman, there is a particular want of critical finesse in denouncing as 'continental science fiction' the work of **IAIN HAMILTON GRANT**, who his readers will know as the foremost exponent of *steampunk materialism*,<sup>13</sup> but who has latterly become – judging by his more recent works' protracted descent into what he has described as 'the nuclear night of the unthinged'<sup>14</sup> – chief scribe of *idealist horror*. In his essay on Lorenz Oken, which accompanies Todosch's drawings, Grant adds an extraordinary coda to the powerful case put in his recent book<sup>15</sup> for the contemporary importance of a philosophy of nature.

As anticipated in Grant's earlier account in **COLLAPSE**<sup>16</sup> of the necessarily speculative form of its central problem – that of accounting for its own possibility qua natural production – the chief horror of naturephilosophy is that of an evacuation of the 'comfort zone of interiority'.<sup>17</sup> If 'the Idea is exterior to the thinking, the thinking is exterior to the thinker, and the thinker is exterior to the nature that produced it', then naturephilosophy's vocation, in the shape of thinking the production of thought, is to turn 'us' inside

13. See, e.g. 'At the Mountains of Madness: The Demonology of the New Earth and the Politics of Becoming', in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. K. A. Pearson (London: Routledge, 1997); and 'Burning AutoPoiOedipus', in *Abstract Culture* 2:5 (At [http://www.ceru.net/swarm2/2\\_auto.htm](http://www.ceru.net/swarm2/2_auto.htm)).

14. 'The Chemistry of Darkness', in *PLI: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 9 (2000), 36-52: 36.

15. *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (NY/London: Continuum, 2006).

16. See 'Speculative Realism', in **COLLAPSE** III, 307-449.

17. *Ibid.*, 334, 343.

out, in the process making it impossible ‘for anyone to recognise themselves in the production of their thoughts’.<sup>18</sup> This is accompanied, too, by an unpleasant community with the lower orders, far beyond zoophrenia (and even *within* the individual – in Oken’s theory of recapitulation the body becomes an infolded horror in which the head is a spine, the jaws and teeth deterritorialized limbs and nails ...).

Since a universe where even thought is a natural production, its ‘content’ thus having no necessary purchase on that production, is indeed something ‘very difficult to imagine’,<sup>19</sup> we might say that a successful naturephilosophy would be a kind of forcible manipulation of the imagination; that it must appear in the form of a literally *mind-bending* speculative science/fiction and a brutal dismemberment of the body of representational thinking, relegating the Kantian a priori to a mere natural-historical *prius*, thought being separated from its conditions not by some absolutised transcendental membrane but by an asymmetry in the time of production.<sup>20</sup> Naturephilosophy thus provides the formal schema for precisely that negation of the ‘insularity of transcendental subjectivity’ which (as Trafford argues) is harboured by the neuroscientific viewpoint and which afflicts Ligotti’s tormented protagonists.

If this gives us permission to speak of naturephilosophy as a kind of intellectual self-harm, an auto-horrification, Grant insists that against its ‘better judgement’, contemporary philosophy must indeed inflict this harm upon itself once again. Does post-Kantian philosophy, he asks, bowed by the blows of naturalism, dare escape the ‘trap’ of

18. Ibid., 343.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 343.

reasserting its ‘comfort zone’ through some neo-Fichtean subordination of the natural conditions of thought (irrecoverably – indeed horrifically – excessive for thought itself) to a pacificatory illusion of self-knowledge, and a resubordination of physics to ethics? In reasserting the need for a (necessarily speculative) account of nature to revoke Kant’s ‘daring act of reason’ which ineluctably peters out into the ‘ethical process’, Grant selects the model in which naturephilosophy’s science-fictional credentials are most ostentatiously paraded – Lorenz Oken’s monstrous (in size as in content) account of the natural generation of the universe.

In pursuing the ultimate ground of nature on the basis that the whole of nature is involved in each part, Oken characterises what Thacker described as the immanent ‘after-life’ of life as a universal Ur-slime [*Urschliem*]. But since each successive sphere of nature constitutes an appearance of ‘something from nothing’, then that ‘nothing’ appears as another element in the naturephilosophical system: Ur-slime and Zero, mucus and matheme, are thus pitted against each other as true genetic elements of nature. Grant’s negotiation of Oken’s twisted dialectic of Zero, the ‘sink’ at the ‘core’ of existence, and Slime as its ‘oozing ground’, ends in the affirmation of an ‘ontological queasiness’ that cannot be ceded to the hygienic instinct. In a conclusion which demonstrates the capacity of naturephilosophy to offer new and profound readings of contemporary philosophical problems – in this case that of Badiou’s mobilisation of a dialectic of ‘animal’ and ‘number’ against Deleuze – Grant argues that the impossibility of abstracting away ‘the shock of the objective world’ means that there can be no ‘slime-free matheme’ unless via a unilateral assertion of

the impossibility of a philosophy of nature – which would be simply to blanch squeamishly at that twisting, oozing process which *is* thinking (or being thought by) nature.

Using the search-engine as a stratigraphical probe to sample the online collective unconscious, artist **STEVEN SHEARER** assembles vast archives (sometimes partially exhibited as works in their own right) recording otherwise uncelebrated cultural and social formations, including in particular the young fans who draw sustenance from the hyperenergetic musical genre of death metal. The *Poems* series (2001–present) draws upon an extensive archive of death metal band and song names, evidence of the genre’s unrelenting quest to make the cutting edges of language coincide with the violence of its sonic bombardment. Resynthesising the archive material to create a hysterical cycle of disturbing, fantastical, and absurd narratives and imagery, Shearer’s well-honed method of selection yields a striking and consistent objective cross-section of this cultural matter.

Although the relentless, hysterical fervour of the *Poems* is certainly amusing at times, Shearer’s work never stoops to ironic condescension. Like the lambent depictions of longhaired fans in his glowering Munch-like paintings, or in portraits which make of the humble biro an old-masterly instrument, the *Poems* are imbued with a sensitivity to a collective existential quandary whose inhabitants seek to anchor themselves to the most extreme point of reference in a world of demonstrable mediocrity. And as Shearer’s *Poems* forcibly and prolongedly hold the viewer’s gaze captive at the point where language is flattened out into a continuous and impassive appeal to what it can’t say, his work rediscovers this extreme point. Beyond the lyrics’

superficial preoccupations with death and violence lie more real and more profound depths of horror, distributed social-existential complexes rather than personal pathologies. Seen in the light of Shearer’s other work – for instance, his archive of thousands of *eBay* photographs that unintentionally afford glimpses into metalheads’ home lives – the evident absurdity of the *Poems*’ unremitting nihilism, the distance between such extremity and ‘real life’, becomes an index of isolation and of the psychic torment of socialisation, showing how the metalhead’s absolute ‘no’ to life anchors them against their inevitable concession to the tepid homeliness of ‘reality’.

In their painstakingly hand-drawn form, the *Poems* have been exhibited both in galleries and in public spaces – Notably, during the 2006 Berlin Biennial, on the flank of an eight-storey building (see p. 322). Thus transformed, they invite a little of the negative sublime unapologetically celebrated by this subculture into the overlit, overfinanced spaces of the contemporary arts whose executives once told Shearer (as documented in *Sorry Steve* [1999]): ‘when we talk about celebrating cultural diversity, we don’t mean yours’.<sup>21</sup> It is through a sort of sociological alchemy that Shearer distils and recombines – so they can no longer be overlooked – the potent elements of what Lovecraft might have called a *shoggoth*-culture, with all the class associations implied in this (one of Shearer’s favourite epithets for his works is ‘lumpen’). Shearer’s poetic invocations also echo those of Lovecraft, who considered his task to be to excite a physiological response in his readers. Again, like the famously overdone Lovecraftian prose – itself frequently

21. See the beautiful recently published monograph accompanying Shearer’s 2007-8 shows in Birmingham and Toronto: *Steven Shearer* (Birmingham/Toronto: Ikon Gallery/Powerplant, 2007).

verging on the comical or hysterical – the *Poems* obsessively *invoke* or *engender*, rather than merely describing, the objectless cosmic horror that inhabits every thinking being – the non-sense that ungrounds sense – but which some, by force of circumstance, are closer to than others, so that they may even cherish the secret of its constant closeness as a source of psychic sustenance.

‘On the Horror of Phenomenology’ finds **GRAHAM HARMAN** arguing, against a certain normative notion of philosophical ‘maturity’, in favour of the demonstrable and necessary weirdness of philosophy. Turning to Husserl’s phenomenology as a test case, Harman suggests that reading its insistence on the excessiveness of intentional objects against Lovecraft’s descriptive delirium might provide some pointers towards the type of ‘weird realism’ he advocates.

Problematising a Kantian reading of Lovecraft, Harman concurs with Miéville that a hallmark of weird writing is that it takes on the ‘unspeakable’ with an ‘excess of specificity’ in description; adding that, rather than suggesting a noumenal ‘backworld’, this is the excess of a *phenomenal* realm pregnant with the menace of ‘malignant beings’ which are threatening precisely in so far as they stalk the very same web of experience whose threads we too clamber along, attempting to ignore their more ominous vibrations.

Using literature’s manufacture of unassimilable and inexhaustible objects as a model for the production of philosophical concepts, Harman insists that the latter’s excess over any definition makes them, too, excessive phenomena, intentional objects whose properties can never be exhaustively enumerated – precisely the model proposed by Husserl’s sensitive and meticulous phenomenology.

Reading the persistent poring of phenomenological description over its object against Lovecraft’s circumlocutory evocations of the unspeakable, Harman discovers – like Negarestani – that ‘real objects taunt us with endless withdrawal’. The probing of a disconnection between the ‘excessive presence’ of intentional objects and the withdrawing correlate that binds their qualities is the motor of both phenomenology and horror – As Miéville argues, the weird and the horrific are always palpable, but their pulpy flesh ultimately always escapes our grasp. What appears at first to be a mere similarity between literary style and philosophical programme reveals, according to Harman, a common strategy for intuiting this faultline in the object, this ‘weird tension in [...] phenomena’.

**KRISTEN ALVANSON**’s contribution presents us with a deformation produced in thought in its ongoing struggle to encompass the horror of nature’s indifference to its classificatory desires. Her *Arbor Deformia* is a cross-section of a discursive phylum, the product of the baffled internal forces and tendencies of reason.

Images such as those in Alvanson’s contribution (not least the fearsome ‘spider-goat’ [p. 366], whose branch in the *Arbor* surely neighbours that of Miéville’s ‘skulltopus’) have always been the object of simultaneous fascination and repulsion. Her photographs capture unfortunate creatures in already preserved form, as ‘doubly-dead’ as Kulik’s monkeys; all-too familiar, but so repugnant as to oblige us to a discursive dissociation. As she notes, they therefore seem to breed conceptual monstrosities, out-of-control taxonomical systems as deranged as the beings they are designed to corral into rational discourse. The *Arbor Deformia*, integrating the biological and taxonomical levels

## COLLAPSE IV

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of this twofold teratology, gives an inventive graphical solution to the twisted logics of Paré's sixteenth-century classifications.

It is not only Miéville's essay, whose very title exhibits the combinatorial dis-ease it discusses, that vindicates this thesis according to which, when reason turns its classificatory attentions toward monsters, taxonomy itself tends to become diseased and monstrous; in fact, Alvanson's work seems a fitting coda to the entire volume in its affirmation that one does not bring the concept to bear on horror without horror simultaneously investing the conceptual.

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to all of our contributors for their work and commitment, and for having collaborated so willingly in our experiment in concept-horror. Their enthusiasm and generosity has made possible a volume whose diversity and wealth of conceptual interconnections this brief overview has only been able to hint at. We hope that the work collected here will – in line with our subtitle – provide inspiration both for further philosophical research, and for further development in the shape of literary and artistic creations fit to assemble philosophical ideas into machines for effective deterritorialization, whether it be through the 'experiential gnosis of horror', 'multiple fraud', 'zoophrenia', 'mental experiment', 'neurotechnology', the 'shock of the objective', 'molecular disembowelment', 'necrophilic reason', the 'furtive broadcasting of disillusionment' or even, in the last resort, through 'purely medical means' ... Let the horrors commence.

Robin Mackay,  
Falmouth, April 2008.

# Infinite Regress into Self-Referential Horror: The Gnosis of the Victim

George J. Sieg

### 0. DWELLING ON THE THRESHOLD

Aversion to stimuli of fear or terror, whether personal or cultural, offers no great mystery beyond the psychological. Neither does the pattern of habituation and desensitization resulting from levels of fear and terror sufficient only to gradually bore the mind and senses. Similarly straightforward is the pattern of trauma, burnout, and malady proceeding from constant and unremitting over-exposure to stimuli producing anxiety and stress. These phenomena, while intriguing to the scholar of behaviour and cognition, offer nothing to compete with the philosophical fascination engendered by contemplation of their weirder sister, Horror. She presides over a genre of art which violates boundaries of medium as surely as she violates the preconceptions of those who apprehend her; yet she shares her imageries, even her key signs and signifiers, with genres which would seem at first examination to be quite distinct.

(How often do the monsters typical of horror find their way into fantasies and ‘science’ fictions? The masters and progenitors of modern horror, Poe and Lovecraft, wrote tales of mystery and wonder along with their more horrific works. In the latter case, the same Mythos appeared in all of his chosen genres).<sup>1</sup>

Whether expressed in the cinema or in the word, or experienced viscerally in the routines or tragedies of life, Horror remains distinctly consistent, arising from an experience of cognitive dread which cannot be escaped or evaded. Indeed, this very conceptual consistency is one of its traits: Horror is the most easily self-referential of all genres.<sup>2</sup> Alone among concepts, Horror depends on the concept of the ‘concept’ for its own conceptual power – since dread *beyond what can already be known to have been conceived* is an indispensable characteristic of horror; alone among concepts, a full conception and understanding of it, implies the experience of it. Horror is not alone among those responses which require self-consciousness; animals lacking individual self-consciousness provide no evidence of experiencing horror despite their extensive capacity for fear. Of course, animals also do not seem to experience any other emotions typical of self-consciousness such as wonder, awe, or creative amusement either. Yet horror remains distinct from these others in its dependence on the

1. See S.T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (Berkeley: Wildside Press, 1990) for an extensive analysis of Lovecraft’s work and philosophy.

2. Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17-42. Carroll’s work presents a theory of ‘art-horror’ elaborated in exacting detail; the important aspect of it referenced here is that the horror genre depends, in his view, on its establishment of direct correlation between the emotional state of the monster’s victim and the emotional state of the audience or reader. The rest of his theory is not necessarily endorsed by the rest of this article.

capacity for conceptual abstraction. This capacity does not seem to be necessitated in the case of awe, which is known to be correlated with various ‘numinous’ states typical of religious and mystical experiences notably lacking in self-referential, conceptual abstraction; nor in the case of wonder, a response which may arise as a meta-response to a mysterious or apparently unfathomable event without any corresponding attempt to ‘conceive’ of or ‘conceptualize’ it any further. Thus it is that while children seem to display an extensive capacity for awe and wonder along with their similarly vast predilection for states of fear and terror (often to the dismay of more ‘rational’ adults), the capability to experience, appreciate, and even cultivate *horror* only *increases* with the skill of rational, conceptual, critical thought. Likewise, one may intellectually understand what numinous awe or wonder may entail, without experiencing them in the same context in which one understands them intellectually. Awe is not, in and of itself, awesome, nor is wonder in and of itself necessarily wonderful, but *horror*, self-referentially, is, of and for itself, *horrible* and *horrifying*. That this is so makes horror the most Gnostic of emotional extremes and excesses, in the sense of being a knowledge characterized by directness of empirical experience (self-referential) rather than based on some correspondent premise (other-referential). In keeping with this, it is no coincidence that those mystics and esoteric philosophers deemed ‘Gnostics’ in the increasingly decadent Imperial Roman cosmopolis elaborated mythic reflections of the world which detailed all manifest reality as nested layers within layers of horrific depravity, their ‘gnosis’ (direct, experiential knowledge) of salvation and escape implicitly depending on a nightmare network of interwoven matrix-horrors to escape *from*. The archaic roots of Gnostic horror can be followed

through the labyrinthine tunnels of historic and prehistoric dualist myths, yet the experiential gnosis of horror is certainly anterior to the dualistic coping mechanisms it inspires in some persons and groups. Independently of, yet inclusive of, both *self* and *other*, Horror pervades consciousness which is conscious of itself: to observe someone sufficiently horrified is horrific. To observe a horrific other – a ‘monster’ – is horrific. Yet to observe oneself horrified is just as horrific, if not more so. Thus, Horror also maintains the fascinating quality of being self-renewing, for while awe and wonder may both collapse under sufficiently detached rational observation, Horror only seems to increase the more it is contemplated.

Yet the perpetrators and effectuators of Horror – ‘monsters’ in whatever form – do not seem to be guarantors of Horror even if they are its prerequisites. (And ‘monsters’ here means anything horrifying, not necessarily only the tentacle-beasts reviled by Lovecraft or the cinematic creations which prey on the sentiments of moviegoers.) That this is so can easily be discerned by noticing that the various beings of Lovecraft’s Mythos appear throughout his own tales of wonder (such as Randolph Carter’s dream quests) with the same frequency that they manifest in overtly horrific contexts in the rest of his work. They spill across the threshold not only of genre, but of authorship, to populate the worlds of Robert Howard and ultimately the annals of contemporary science-fiction in a variety of media. Lest this phenomenon be thought limited to the bizarre Old Ones of Lovecraftian provenance, the example of the vampire should be sufficient contradiction. Perhaps the most classic staple of ‘gothic horror’, whether cinematic or literary, vampires nevertheless also find themselves in

fantasy, science-fiction, and even works classifiable only as mythic dramas (Anne Rice), not to mention their total escapist attraction in the form of gothic role-playing and subculture, neither of which exactly stimulate anything like the emotion of horror in their participants. The only consistent signifier of Horror is not the *monster*, but rather its *victim*.

What might this tell us about the nature of self-consciousness and its expression through the aesthetic? Why is it that the most direct indicator of self-consciousness combined with rational, abstract cognition, seems to be the capacity for horror, and how is it the case that this condition can only be signified aesthetically through its embodiment in a victim? Most perplexingly – and, as will be revealed through this meditation upon Horror, most horrifically – why do the perpetrators of Horror, the ‘monsters’, exert such an attraction upon self-conscious beings that they violate not only their victims but also the boundaries of their own genre, ultimately to become not only figures of fun and fantasy, and occasionally figures of awe and wonder in the frequent cases of religions of the monstrous or terrible, but even role-models which provide for some not only escapist pleasure, but a guide to life?

## I. EXALTATION OF THE VICTIM

Impaled on towering spikes, the victims of Vlad Tepes – Dracula – make apt examples of Horror’s veneration of the violated. Is it any coincidence that the larger-than-life heroine-victims of the screen Dracula are likewise exalted figures? The horror is not merely one of possible identification with the damsel or hero threatened by the monstrous being; the work of Lovecraft is an excellent indication of

this, desexualized as it is, and with characters stripped down to being bare instruments of perception, as Houellebecq points out in his thorough study of Lovecraftian horror.<sup>3</sup> Yet Lovecraft's depictions of violated observers whose very perceptions are impaled by an intrusive, inescapably bizarre alien otherness, do have something in common with cinematic preferences for innocent feminine youth across a genre inclusive of innumerable ladies of monstrous fate, murderous fate (Vivian Leigh, screen avatar of a victim conceived by an author deeply influenced by Lovecraft, Robert Bloch), demonic violation (Linda Blair, whose diabolical inhabitant was not merely a standard horned scaly devil à la Dante or Bosch, but in fact was identified in the *Exorcist* film tradition as the hideous disease-demon Pazuzu, a Mesopotamian entity worthy of Lovecraft's Mad Arab necromancer Al-Hazred and his *Necronomicon*), or demonic seduction and subversion (Mia Farrow, mother of *Rosemary's Baby*, offspring of Satan himself). Hidden within the obscure commonality here discerned is further *gnosis* of horror: let us vivisect it, and see.

Whether male or female, the ideal victim of horror is innocent, *as regards the horror*. This is not just in the usual analogical sense of being undeserving of their torment (for while many victims of fictional horror are not innocent of all wrongdoing, none could possibly deserve exactly what befalls them) but in the literal sense of previously having no *gnosis* of it. Indeed, in Lovecraft's work, it is the horrifying *knowledge* which is often itself the source of the awful consequences befalling the victim. Likewise, victims of demonic

3. Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006), 57-62, 69. (First published as *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie* [Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1991]).

possession may theoretically have done something to invite the demon in, but do not have the 'gnosis' of it ... until it arrives. At which point it is too late to forget, or to banish the knowledge. But if horror is an emotion particular only to abstract, reasoning self-consciousnesses, why *don't* the victims 'deserve' what transpires, especially if they are guilty of something? It seems that one of the *reasons* that *reason* is required for horror, is that it is precisely *reason* which, in being violated, produces the experience of horror. Hence, the purest horror – 'concept-horror' – in which it is some *concept* which proves to be the most horrifying of all.

Before seeking out the most archaic formulae of such 'concept-horror', let us continue the autopsy of the horror victim. The archetypal possessed horror victim (as well as the favoured 'Satanic' sacrifice), a virgin young girl, is *in-nocent* by definition – and often expected, colloquially at least, to be blond and pretty. The significance of this, beyond the aesthetic, will be peeled back later as this morbid inquiry proceeds. It is worth inquiring: is involuntary possession always horrible? What about the identity of the possession victim? Even the lacklustre *Exorcist* prequel (still technically a horror film despite its heavy reliance on terror), set *in Africa*, ends up requiring the demon to eventually possess a European female presented as an object of desire in the course of the story. How would such a possession film fare if all the possession victims were of African identity and undefined desirability? The zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* are most successful in their assaults on innocent young women, and survived only by the black hero of the film who is finally killed when the white mob purging the zombies miscodes him as ... one of the monsters.

Leaving demons and victims of miscoding aside, further insight into the realm of horror lies in the characterization of one of the most classic horror motifs: the standard vampire-victim (or vampire love-interest). He or she begins as innocent *of the vampiric reality*, even if not virginal. Is it horrific for a vampire to prey on another vampire? Yet there is a certain commonality between the vampire, whether male or female, and its prey; the prey is likewise pale, often presented as attractive – fitted to be turned into a vampire, in fact. What about the victims of other, more inhuman, horrible monsters? While such creatures will sometimes kill indiscriminately (especially in ‘terror’ films as opposed to horror proper), they do seem to have an unusual taste for devouring the civilized, the self-aware, the rational: victims who are particularly innocent of the creatures’ visceral realm. Even when the jungle-beast or the tentacle-monster starts eating its way through its own natives or cultists – is this alone horrific? Not enough to make a horror film out of it. Even the horror of the murder victim, in order to survive in the realm of more realist horror fiction, seems to share the signal traits: either innocence of unavoidably fitting the criteria of ‘victim’, until it is too late; or the equally horrible foreknowledge of unavoidably fitting that criteria; innocence of the world (physical, moral, or conceptual) from whence the horrible murderer/monster originates; and again, a cultural and racial type frequently associated with, or perhaps conflated with, ‘purity’.

Why should this particular type of victim find itself exalted through an entire genre which is not even so specifically jealous of its own monstrous protagonists? And how does this relate to the conceptual nature of horror?

## II. REALITY IS HORROR: THE FIRST ARYAN LIE

Of all variations on the theme of horror, what has come to be known as Lovecraftian horror is indeed the most conceptual. In some cases, Lovecraft’s clinical descriptions of the utterly alien and bizarre juxtaposed with the inability of his protagonists (mere projections of the perceptive faculty) to ignore or turn away until it is too late, suffice to produce far greater horror than any description of their actual physical violation could hope to do. As Houellebecq points out, this is one reason why Lovecraftian horror is so difficult to portray through visual media,<sup>4</sup> though as this examination will show, the variable manifestations of horror all have an unexpectedly common conceptual trait despite their differences in regard to content. An interesting exception to the general rule that Lovecraftian films wind up being merely fantastic rather than horrible, is John Carpenter’s 1995 *In the Mouth of Madness*. It manages to convey Lovecraftian horror through an almost excessively self-referential structure and plot: instead of being a Lovecraft story transplanted into a modern setting, it features as antagonist an author representing a sort of combination of Lovecraft himself and his dark prophet Nyarlathotep, whose work begins horrifically to be reflected in reality following his mysterious disappearance. One of the most memorable, and horrifying, scenes in the film involves the investigating detective trapped in a cinema watching a film that begins to depict him being assaulted by creatures reminiscent of Lovecraft’s story *Dagon*. Despite the usual unfilmability of Lovecraft’s eldritch horrors, *In the Mouth of Madness* captures the inescapable violation of perception, reason, and sanity which occurs in the stories, by actually using the context

4. Houellebecq, 64-69.

of film itself to reflect the self-referential, self-conscious nature of horror, when visual depictions are called for. At the same time, the constant use of embedded Lovecraft quotations, ostensibly 'fictional' even within the realm of the film, as part of the plot of the story itself, lends the film a quality of impossibility and madness which is a hallmark of Lovecraft's work. Outside the horror genre proper, a similar technique was utilized in David Cronenberg's adaptation of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* by including the bizarre events presaging and during the writing of the book in the plot of the film itself, thereby again using self-referentiality to evade the Lovecraftian curse of unfilmability. While the book is surreal and often disgusting, some of the scenes in the film, particularly those involving monstrous eroticism, certainly approach horror, although that may not have been the specific intent. Cronenberg's entire *oeuvre* is replete with the imagery of 'bio-horror', in which the conceptual boundaries of the flesh are violated and protagonists become their own monstrous victims – as in *The Fly* – demonstrating that the monster is not only 'interstitial', as Carroll describes,<sup>5</sup> but is also an instance of 'incomplete abjection', in Kristeva's sense. The conceptual boundaries of the bodily self are horrifically violated not just through destruction or even invasion, but ultimately through an inability to separate from a body that itself becomes alien.<sup>6</sup> As a final example, Hitchcock's films, whether suspense or horror, tend to involve frequent, if subtle, self-reference to the eye as instrument of perception, the camera as avatar of the viewer's inability to cease looking and therefore

5. Carroll, 31-39.

6. Bio-horror is thoroughly examined throughout Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).

recording what is perceived (however horrible), or occasionally, to the staged or dramatic quality of events.

Considering the abstract nature of such perceptual 'concept' horror as is particularly present in Lovecraft's work, is there any indication that his personal and aesthetic preferences, such as his Aryan racism as revealed throughout his personal biography and correspondence,<sup>7</sup> contribute significantly to the content of his work? Sufficient investigation has been done by others in exhaustive consideration of the role of miscegenation in Lovecraft's cosmology, as well as his representation of inhuman, meaningless, blind cosmic Life through unnameable and indescribable 'outer' horrors, to establish that there is a certain analogy between the 'penetration' of the Aryan purity by 'hideous', alien, foreign elements, and the penetration of hapless Anglo-Saxon professors by tentacled predators from Outside their known reality.<sup>8</sup> This necessitates a corresponding examination of the philosophical ramifications of Aryan racism in the context of horror, or at least a consideration of whether such an element is indeed *indispensable* to Lovecraftian horror. But if so, is it indispensable to the whole horror genre? Or even to Horror itself? The intrusive, stark, 'inconceivable reality' of the concentration

7. In reference to New York, Lovecraft wrote in a letter: 'The organic things – Italo-Semitic-Mongoloid – inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth's corruption, and slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets. [...] They – or the gelatinous fermentation of which they were composed – seemed to ooze, seep and trickle thro' the gaping cracks in the horrible houses [...] and I thought of [...] unwholesome vats, crammed to the vomiting point with gangrenous vileness.' This description could, taken out of context, just as plausibly be guessed as an extract from an obscure Lovecraft tale concerning the miscegenated progeny of some horrific elder or outer things.

8. e.g. Joshi, 74-80, 120-45.

camp as often remarked upon by both scholars of modern evil and the Holocaust itself seems to attest that Horror is inseparable from Aryan racism, so investigating this relationship of dependence from another vantage may prove revealing.

The first Aryans to conceive of absolute horror, the Zoroastrian dualists of prehistoric Iran, found its origins in the Mother of Abomination, *Drug*, later known as *Druj*, whose name comprises both what we would know as a 'drag-on' and also what might best be conceived as a 'simulation', a corruption of reality, whether in the form of a strategic dissimulation, a false affirmation, or an outright physical blackening as of a decomposing corpse. The word is usually translated simply as 'Lie', and was also used in the context of betrayal, such as, of an oath, promise, or contract. Why *these* Aryans in Iran as the originators of a concept of intrusive, infested, parasitic horror, propagating itself upon and within a host innocent of its nature? The *Druj*, mother of all demons and of the Devil himself, originally an abstraction, a conceptual evil knowledge, the Angstful Mind, reaches out from her primordial, prehistoric Middle-Eastern domain to eventually rip herself free from the stomachs of Aryan astronauts in Geigeresque, cinematic form as the 'alien'. Like the 'alien Mother', the *Druj* is horrifically and monstrously interstitial – She is fecund, yet death-producing; female, yet signified by masculine intrusiveness. She penetrates and violates like a rapist, yet she is an endless womb of darkness and depravity.<sup>9</sup>

9. For extensive comments on femininity and gender-transgression in horror, see Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder: Westview, 1999). See also Barbara Creed's essay, 'Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', for an apt description of an 'archaic, phallic mother' reminiscent of *Druj*, with the Angra Mainyu as her surrogate 'male component'.

What, then, was the origin of this power – the power not of an 'image', but of a *concept* of parasitic, infectious disease-horror – over the cultural (and perhaps even philosophical) mind of the Zoroastrian Aryan, making him the very inventor of the concept of evil?

The Aryans in Iran, unlike their Vedic peers and Lovecraft both, would not seem to have had obvious justification for elaborating a traditional ethnic xenophobia into full-blown moral paranoia. The Brahmins were faced with an indigenous population whose dominant genetic traits have been proven by history to be mightier than their Aryocentric anti-miscegenation law codes. In parallel, Lovecraft was driven from New York by the dominant, successful immigrant populations. As we know, he found this experience horrific, yet in contrast, any expected 'horror' on the part of the Brahmins for the dark non-Aryan people seems to have been notably absent in India. Black Kali herself, whether an Aryan death goddess, as some claim, or the terrible indigenous mother herself, inspires simultaneous awe and terror, but not horror. The mixing of castes and the Kali-yuga, inspired woe or detached sorrow in the pure Aryans – but not horror. The Aryans in Iran, by contrast, were apparently the sole inhabitants of a desert plateau, and thus without significant competition, their recessive traits secure until Arab invasions millennia later. Lest it be suggested that a *lack* of racial competition turned their conflict-obsessed, warlike selves against each other until the prophet Zoroaster invented his horrors merely as a foil to produce cultural unity, the reader should only need to be reminded of northern Europe, which occupied itself quite consistently in a constant state of unrelenting tribal warfare throughout its entire history until it was Christianized, uninterrupted by anything like a gnosis of horror,

conceptual, racial, or otherwise.

It can only be that, for reasons unknown (perhaps reasons sufficiently horrific that, as in the case of Great Cthulhu and the Lovecraftian Old Ones, it may be more wholesome *not to know*), the Aryans in Iran encountered, or believed themselves to have encountered, a threat perceived to be sufficiently difficult to distinguish from themselves that it was, or *might be*, within.<sup>10</sup> The requisite condition for absolute horror is presented: inescapable dread, a factor which would produce constant terror – except that flight is not only impossible, but inconceivable. Conceptual horror enshrined in philosophy was then born in Iran as the Mother of Abominations. It is no exaggeration to say that by the time the moral dualism of the Zoroastrians was fully cosmologically and performatively elaborated in the *Vendidad*, their book of ritual codes and taboos against the devils, their obsession with purity – the exaltation of themselves as potential victims of intrusive, penetrative violation by Druj and her ravenous children – had reached proportions so extreme that the same ritual fixations outside of an excusably cultural or religious context would now earn a diagnosis of paranoid-schizophrenia with combined obsessive-compulsive disorder, or worse. The *Vendidad* is a study in terror if not outright horror itself. Each ‘Fargard’, or chapter, recites repetitively and thoroughly the number

10. Lovecraft himself speculated on a similar process involving fear of hidden, internal others in European tradition, writing in his classic study *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (NY: Dover, 1973), ‘Much of the power of Western horror-lore was undoubtedly due to the hidden but often suspected presence of a hideous cult of nocturnal worshippers whose strange customs were rooted in the most revolting fertility rites of immemorial antiquity. This secret religion, stealthily handed down among peasants for thousands of years despite the outward reign of Druidic, Greco-Roman, and Christian faiths in the regions involved, was marked by “Witches Sabbaths” [...] on Walpurgis Night and Hallowe’en, the traditional breeding-seasons of the goats and sheep and cattle; and became the source of vast riches of sorcery legend.’

of strokes with the punishment whip a transgressor is to receive for violating any of the minutiae of purity laws, concerned with everything from moral conduct to the compulsively precise handling of corpses in order to ensure that the community and the natural world remain undefiled by the *naso-druj*, the corpse-demon. Extreme infractions, such as exposure of corpses to water or fire, result in the transgressor being publicly flayed alive. Many interesting technicalities of the Zoroastrian hygiene obsession can be found in the *Vendidad*, such as the association of albinism with uncleanness, and the rule that physicians-in-training were to practice on those who worshipped the *daevas* so as to avoid accidentally killing the faithful. Male homosexuality is so abhorred that its practitioners are proclaimed in the *Vendidad* to be demons incarnate. Sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is an offense against purity worthy of death. Eventually, for the Zoroastrians, any being of evil thoughts, or an evil mind, might be a vehicle for Druj. This does not only include representatives of any other creed whatsoever: even those who outwardly professed the Good Religion might secretly be ‘endowed with the Lie’. The incredible irony of Zoroastrianism is that the same Aryan trait of xenophobia which made the ancient Iranians amenable to this most paranoid of all world-views had to be abandoned in order for the Zoroastrian creed of absolute moral goodness in opposition to absolute moral evil to be adopted. Once the Aryans adopted the Zoroastrian religion, their enemies were not *outsiders* but *any others* (even unrecognizable others in their midst, like Drujic ‘body-snatchers’), *who carried the Lie*. Even, and especially, fellow Aryans – a notion inconceivable amongst any other Indo-European group, none of which had any difficulty either with feuding incessantly with each other indiscriminately,

or with uniting easily against even more foreign outsiders. Yet the Iranians became the exception, and gave the world the first universalist moral philosophy, ultimately bequeathing it to the ancient Jews, who shared with the Indo-European ancestors of the Aryans a xenophobic racism, even while the Jews lacked those recessive genetic traits the preservation of which, as signifiers of purity, inspired a racialist concept amongst the Indo-Europeans forgotten aeons ago.

A comparison of the Druj to the Old Ones of the Lovecraftian mythos is intriguing, for while both concepts were invented by racists, the inventors of the former ceased to be racist as soon as they conceived their horror, whilst Lovecraft became only more vitriolic with time and exposure to foreign people. The principal difference is easily summarized: the Druj was considered to be *evil*, whilst Cthulhu, Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, and all their various spawn, are simply *alien*. (In this, the Geigeresque cinema ‘alien’ is more Lovecraftian than Zoroastrian, yet as the quasi-androgynous-yet-penetrating ‘demon-child’ of the Alien Mother it functions much as do the daevic offspring of Druj. Unlike Lovecraft’s Outer Ones, it is susceptible to physical, material defeat in a modern combat myth, and by a very un-Lovecraftian heroine who defends the moral world order against violation by both the alien outsider, and the ‘Drujic’ simulation-strategy of the nefarious corporation and its android agent. Perhaps more Lovecraftian in effect than Ripley’s ‘alien’ nemesis is Norman Bates, – ‘possessed by the Druj’, the ‘lie’ of his mother, yet in that very sense his own victim and his own monster, even as he butchers his victim, who finds the purifying waters of the shower no refuge from asexual penetration by the avatar of

the Outside). Lovecraft’s own universe, in contrast to both of those visions, is a *horrifically* amoral one. The rational perceiver cannot escape the immeasurable, futile, imbecile meaninglessness of the blind cosmos, and is devoured by it. Yet the Zoroastrian believes that through morality (Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds), the Druj and her children can be overcome. Ironically, in doing so, the Zoroastrian remains ‘Aryan’ in name only, abandoning the signifying trait of racial xenophobia which Lovecraft himself maintained – even through the absolute materialism consistently apparent in the same correspondence in which he expresses his racist views. This is not mere coincidence. Rather, it plainly demonstrates an inescapable ‘Aryan truth’ which is perhaps the ‘Aryan horror’: As long as the Aryan identifies in any meaningful way with ethnic traits which are constantly genetically embattled by competing populations, the capacity for perceiving a world of unremitting conceptual horror remains. This observation, however, fails to account for why Lovecraft elaborated, under the influence of his racial obsessions, a cosmology of absolute horror, while his equally race-obsessed Brahmin counterparts by contrast in fact ultimately presented a cosmology of all-pervading, triumphal wonderment and awe. Simultaneously, the Brahmins’ Iranian cousins, originally equally xenophobic, chose to maintain their paranoia through moralism – at the cost of their ethnic fixation. It is Lovecraft’s philosophical materialism which settles the matter: both the Indian Brahmins and the Iranians maintained cultural beliefs in a spiritual realm independent of the material world. Lovecraft did not.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note that the first ‘Aryan Truth’ of Gotama Buddha, who rose to prominence during an age of

11. Joshi, 7-45.

increasing Indian rationalism and critical thinking, was that all life is pervaded with suffering, rendering theism irrelevant. For Lovecraft, thoroughly atheistic and avowedly soulless, it was not just suffering, but utter horror. Yet his ultimate rejection of the opportunity to write Nazi propaganda in the pre-war decade, and his rejection of Nazi atrocity and genocide, demonstrates something else: while Lovecraft's cosmos was a brutal one, he was not himself maltheistic<sup>12</sup>

12. In contrast to *dystheism*, which merely supposes that the deity is not good, *maltheism* proposes that the deity is actively and intentionally malicious. It should be noted that neither of those alternatives specify whether or not it is advisable to venerate the deity in question. The Zoroastrian Church condemned two maltheistic sects, one of which, called the *daevayasma*, was accused of venerating the Druj, Ahriman, and the *daevas* apotropeically – that is, with the intent to placate or banish them. The other sect, that of the *yatukih* sorcerers, was accused of actively honoring the evil principles with the intent to gain power from doing so: the original example of what the Christian world knows as the 'pact with the Devil'. It remains unclear whether or not the *yatukih* also recognized the existence of a 'good' deity opposing Ahriman and the Druj, and if so, whether they ignored him, or actively opposed him. (Or whether they acknowledged him as good at all). It seems that the Lovecraftian cults of the Old Ones would qualify as maltheistic only in the 'Derleth recension' of the Cthulhu Mythos, since only that later, dualized version of Lovecraft's cosmology promotes the Elder Gods as moral opponents of the Old Ones. It may be possible to consider some forms of monotheism to be necessarily maltheistic, when an understanding of the god is offered in which its omnipotence (or ultra-potence, in cases in which it is more powerful than any other being or beings combined, but not actually all-powerful) is not only greater than its benevolence, but uncompromised with any notion of benevolence whatsoever. Within such possible monotheistic conceptions of a non-benevolent god who is either the only god or the supreme one, a further distinction may perhaps be drawn between *apotropaic maltheism*, in which the god or deity is venerated in the hope that its malefic attention may be turned away, *contractual maltheism*, in which the power is venerated in order to increase one's standing, stature, or power within its reality or domain, and *latreic maltheism*, in which it is actively worshipped or adored in a sort of religious Stockholm-syndrome, a compulsive response to its irresistible but awful or malign numinosity. A sub-category of latreic maltheism might be *propitiatory maltheism*, in which it is supposed that the malice of the divine being can be mollified in some way even if not actively averted, as in the case of apotropaic maltheism. It should be noted that this typology of maltheism could easily be mirrored with reference to dystheistic demon-cults in which destructive (but not intentionally malicious) powers are venerated for the aims or reasons described. The disease-demon Pazuzu, for example, was viewed as dangerously destructive most of the time, as was the even more feared child-slaying Lamashtu, but there is

enough to embrace such a conception with participatory enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup> He did not want to contribute to the world of horrors; rather, he rejected life. If he had believed in a soul, he would have been a Gnostic dualist, but even this option was closed to him in his atheistic materialism. (The Gnostics, while rejecting the supposedly-divine 'archons', the spiritual creators of, and rulers of, the material world of horrors, asserted an all-Good, all-perfect, spiritual reality of divine emanations beyond it; an option totally unacceptable to Lovecraft's materialistic 'cosmicism').<sup>14</sup>

no indication that either one was understood to murder human beings sadistically or for the purpose of deriving pleasure specifically from harming people. In this sense, the difference between dystheism and maltheism could be likened to the difference between honoring man-eating beasts (or an advanced race of amoral extraterrestrials, for a more 'godlike' analogy) and honoring serial or mass-murderers (or, to continue the analogy of 'advanced' beings, a race of creature that hunts human beings for sport or pleasure).

13. While it might be considered questionable to assert that the Nazi philosophy is maltheistic since 'Providence' or the 'Gott-force' in Nature was understood by the Nazis to support Aryans and cause them to flourish, it would certainly have been perceived as maltheistic by Lovecraft. He was married to a Jewish woman, reviled violence and cruelty, and was too materialistic to have considered theological justifications for killing as are found in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which the god Krishna reveals to the story's protagonist that he should have no regret over killing even those for whom he feels respect or affection since all beings are merely projections of an ultimately indestructible Self. Himmler was reported to have frequently carried a translation of this text – and was presumably not, for this reason, a maltheist, despite his affection for the imagery of death. The ideology of those Jews who willingly cooperated with the Nazi regime (especially any who cooperated with the SS) could easily have been described as one of the forms of maltheism proposed above, however, particularly in cases wherein the plight of the Jews was understood to have been sent as divine retribution, since modern Jews, unlike their ancient predecessors, generally regard Yahweh as omnipotent (thanks to Zoroastrian influence identifying Yahweh with the omnipotent Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, subsequent to their liberation by Cyrus the Great and his Zoroastrian Persians, from captivity in Babylon). It is perhaps this potential for maltheism within monotheism that led to the famous 'trial of God in Auschwitz' account of Elie Wiesel, and the various elaborations of 'Holocaust theology' in modern Judaism.

14. Ironically, the earliest Gnostics themselves seem to have been Hellenized Alexandrian Jews, probably expatriate in the wake of the second Jewish revolt under

The Zoroastrians, however, maintained their spiritual beliefs despite their conception of the 'life-horror' of Druj. They only conceived of such horror in the absence of the simple othering process that gave rise to the Vedic caste system, or the assimilation of local populations that characterized the gradual Indo-European drift into Europe. Instead, whatever ethnic or cultural influences threatened the ancient Iranians, these threats must have been perceived as *outwardly* indistinguishable from the Aryan population, requiring a new concept in order to maintain Aryan self-other polarity. That concept: horror – mother of absolute dualism; as Druj, Mother of Abominations. In identifying that which was 'other' than the ambiguity of the life of flesh, the Zoroastrians also invented the Iranian version of the Indo-European cognitive dualism. In contrast to societies of gradual, graduated ethnic mixture wherein this perspective manifested as mind-body dualism, in *apparently* homogenous Iran, it manifested as *moral* dualism. Instead of an escape from the embodied world, as sought by Orphics, Gnostics, and yogis alike, the Zoroastrians conceived of immortal youth in a perfected, resurrected body, inhabiting an eternally perfected world of monotonous, sterile cleanliness and light, given to Ahura Mazda's faithful as a reward for moral behaviour. For Lovecraft, materialist that he was, no such solace could be found either in

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Trajan, who particularly reviled the God of Israel as an evil 'demiurge'. See Carl B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), for details. They generally abominated the whole material cosmos, but proposed a transcendent spiritual escape, in a manner similar to the renunciation of the round of rebirth by Indian philosophers seeking liberation, and to the earlier Orphic mystics. While all these philosophies share in common an origin in the collision of Indo-European and non-Indo-European cultural patterns, only Gnosticism seems to have originated amongst people who were themselves an ethnic out-group within an Indo-European society – and it is only Gnosticism which proposes not only a binding and malignant material world, but a malicious creator-god as its origin.

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spiritual transcendence or eternal life through resurrection. In a great biographical and historical double irony, Lovecraft the racist married a Jewish woman, Sonia Greene, exempting her from his xenophobic tirades – yet his materialism historically descended from a rationalistic response to Judaeo-Christianity, the offspring of Zoroastrian dualism and Semitic culture.

### III. PURITY

There can be no reversing the unique tragedy of the Holocaust. It must be remembered, with shame and horror, for as long as human memory continues. Only by remembering can we pay fitting tribute to the victims. (UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, observing International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, 2006, anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Soviets.)

Now archetypal symbols of human evil, often regarded as actually living embodiments of absolute horror, the Nazis are strangely absent from fictional horror, while their presence (or their equivalent, such as Palpatine's Galactic Empire of *Star Wars* fame) is surreally commonplace alongside various more eldritch monsters in the annals of fantasy and science-fiction. Additionally, Occult Nazism is a staple of fringe conspiracy lore and pseudo-esoteric crypto-history, and Nazi super-villains and super-sorcerers of some variety are by no means infrequent adversaries in occult fiction and suspense thrillers. This alone is peculiar, since surely the Nazis are regarded as infinitely more horrific, in carnal reality, than any serial murderer one could name – yet not a single horror-genre film of any significance has ever featured someone racially motivated to prey on non-Aryan victims, much less featured an actual Nazi as its antagonist.

(The infamous ‘Nazi exploitation’ genre of course excepted – save that it qualifies more as pornography than horror.) More peculiar still is the occasional association, in occult and fantasy/science-fiction, of said Nazi super-villains with black magic, ‘Satanic’ rites, and the conjuration of terrible ancient monstrosities blatantly reminiscent of Lovecraft’s Mythos. (The tentacled horrors emerging from the abyss in the *Hellboy* comics and films with the assistance of Nazi sorcerers and Rasputin serve as an excellent example.) Beneath the apparently superficial aesthetic of the pop-culture sensibility lurks something of significance: the same perpetrators of violence and horror – whether evil Nazis or Cthulhu monsters – are determined to be figures of either *horror* or *fantasy* based specifically on the identities of their *victims*. Thus, while Lovecraft’s violated professors are often stripped of all significant personality and traits, even of any references to sexuality, they remain *Anglo-Saxon* professors, horrified by the miscegenated, bestial realities they confront. In fact, so long as they are not engaged in the violation of Lovecraft’s ideal Aryan scientists (modeled more or less after himself), the very same tentacular Old Ones somehow desist from being figures of actual horror, instead crossing genres and winding up being summoned for genocidal purposes by more murderous Germanic professors in the vein of Mengele and Himmler, whose racial sensibilities, if not their ethics, Lovecraft embraced. It would seem that *horror* as it is generally appreciated within contemporary culture not only requires victims identifiable with the originating ethno-cultural group, but also depends upon the total disassociation of the monster from possible identification with such victims. That is, horror requires both a Zoroastrian dualism, and the maintenance (at least cryptically) of the racialism the Zoroastrians themselves

rejected in order to avoid the horror. The work of Lovecraft represents a striking testament to the fact that, from the perspective of the Aryan racist, the manifest physical world is a whole *world of horror*, a reality not just of terrible strife, or frightful competition for resources, but indeed an inescapably dreadful experience of *invasion from without*.

This phenomenon of belief provides further demonstration that the Nazi preoccupation with ‘Jewish materialism’ and with the supposedly insidious nature of Jewish sexuality as virally infecting, perverting, and corrupting the otherwise pure German race, was by no means an artifact of Christian morality combined with political expedience. For the Zoroastrian Iranians also displayed a paranoid response to confrontation with influences perceived as invasive from without and hidden within. The Nazis, however, despite all their dualistic propaganda, rejected the solution of moral dualism, preferring instead consciously and willfully to become embodied perpetrators of absolute horror upon their presumed infiltrators. While Nazi propaganda depicted Jews in verminous terms, and displayed the octopus-tentacles of the Elders of Zion insinuating themselves upon defenseless globes and world-maps, the Nazis did not depict Jews as externally menacing, mighty demonic beings with huge armies of Satanic devils at their disposal, capable of opposing the Aryan legions on equal footing. While the Nazis presented the ‘hordes’ from the Communist east as threatening mobs of ‘sub-humans’, such mobs were certainly not depicted as mythically comparable to the bewitching majesty of the Angstful Mind and all the monstrous and terrible children of the Druj. Stalin was no Ahriman, at least not to the Nazis. Rather, the self-proclaimed elite of the Nazi party, Himmler’s SS, reveled in its own imagery of death,

and glorified in the extermination not of mighty evil foes, but of *weakness*, both in themselves and in others. In simple terms, they chose to act the part of their own monsters. It is an irony of history and human thought that the Nazis' chosen victims had become the world's most loathed yet sometimes venerated ethnic group aeons previously, only after combining their own xenophobia with a moral dualism invented by Iranian Aryans for the purpose of adapting their own racism to an as yet unidentified, invisible enemy. Yet, despite the clearly monstrous nature of Nazi policy, Heinrich Himmler is often quoted as remarking that the real Nazi 'triumph' lay in their performance of horrific deeds while remaining otherwise humane and uncorrupt – at least in their own minds, the SS represented less a Stockholm-syndrome style identification with and veneration of 'life-as-horror', and more an attempt to somehow buy off 'life-horror' through mass offerings of victims rendered suitable due to the Jewish adoption of post-Aryan moral dualism as an ethical philosophy augmenting the Jews' pre-existent ethnic exclusivism.

Still, even as the Nazis remain the most morally demonized of all possible monsters, the exaltation of the pure white victim remains consistent and genre-inviolable: evil as the Nazi may be, the monster violating the same lovely blondes who could well be the Nazi ideal of beauty, is *horrible*. Lest the association of arcane horrors with monstrous-Aryans-gone-bad (rather than Aryan victims violated) be thought a post-war consequence, consider that Dracula, the vampiric horror icon, is based on a figure of Romanian history considered a local hero of Christendom, utilizing the *horror of impalement* as a deterrent against invasion by foreign *others*, the non-Aryan Turks. Even the

Zoroastrians were racist, albeit sporadically, when fighting Central Asian adversaries. Lovecraft was not beyond re-appropriating monstrous imageries in a non-horrific context to make his racist point. His pentacular Great Old Ones with their asexual lost civilization, eventually overthrown by their own decadent progeny, resonate in strange kinship with the human researchers who discover their remains beneath the Antarctic ice – a closer kinship than those researchers would have had to fellow humans whom Lovecraft would have called 'inferior stock'. Such a demonstration of the ultimate identification of the monstrous with Aryan purity need not be considered completely tangential in Lovecraft's work, however. In one of his more unusual tales, somehow one of wonder and horror simultaneously, Lovecraft's bare instrument of perception, the narrator, discovers itself to *be* the monster. In this short story is collapsed and compressed the full gnosis of the Aryan truth of horror, ultimate originator of both the moral dualism and the renewed Aryan dualism of absolute racial superiority, and of self-victimization, as an antidote to perceived weakness. The purest form of conceptual horror is the realization of inescapable identity with the monstrous perception – the concept – which is both the object and source of horror. Yet, when that object of horror is also the subject, the instrument of perception, wave upon wave of self-referential, cascading horror is the result. Zoroastrian dualism provides one solution – a 'good' spiritual identity for the self, an 'evil' spiritual identity for the other, horrific only in 'this world'. Nazi racism provides the other solution – 'evil' deeds of horror performed by the self as a displacement of the horror of invasion by the other, the pure becoming the monstrous: the self-exalted victim, the now-monstrous Aryan; the reality victim, the scapegoated Jew. For Lovecraft, though, as for any Aryanist

## COLLAPSE IV

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materialist, there was no solution or escape from the horror, as becoming the monster through deliberate identification is hardly an option for the extreme reductionist. For him, life is a conceptual nightmare with only the void of an empty consciousness as contrast.

# Nine Disputations on Theology and Horror

Eugene Thacker

## 1. AFTER-LIFE

Ever since Aristotle distinguished the living from the non-living in terms of *psukhê* – commonly translated as ‘soul’ or ‘life-principle’ – the concept of ‘life’ has itself been defined by a duplicity – at once self-evident and yet opaque, capable of categorization and capable of further mystification. This duplicity is related to a another one, namely, that there are also two Aristotles – Aristotle-the-metaphysician, rationalizing *psukhê*, form, and causality, and Aristotle-the-biologist, observing natural processes of ‘generation and corruption’ and ordering the ‘parts of animals’.

Arguably, the question of life is the burning question of the contemporary era, one in which life is everywhere at stake as ‘bare life’, one in which ‘all politics is biopolitics’. If the question of Being was the central issue for antiquity (raised again by Heidegger), and if the question of God

– as alive or dead – was the central issue for modernity (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), then perhaps the central question today is that of Life – the function of the concept of ‘life itself’, the two-fold approach to life as at once scientific and mystical, the return of vitalisms of all types, and the pervasive politicization of life.

The question that runs through these brief *disputatio* is the following: Can there be an ontology of ‘life’ that does not immediately become a concern of either Being or God? Put differently, if one accepts that the concept of ‘life’ is irreducible to biology, what then is to prevent it from becoming reducible to theology? Let us be even more particular: To what extent is ‘life’ as a concept always situated between a biology of a non-ontological ‘life itself’ and an onto-theology of the life-beyond-the-living, or ‘after-life’?

But what comes ‘after life’? Is it death, decay, and decomposition, or is it resurrection and regeneration? Is it, in biological terms, the transformation of the living into the non-living, from the organic life of molecules to non-organic matter? Or does it involve a theological re-vitalization of the resurrected, living cadaver? In either case, the after-life bears some relation to the ‘during life’ and the ‘before life’, and it is precisely the ambiguity of these relationships that has shaped the debates on mechanism and vitalism in the philosophy of biology, as well as the earlier debates in Scholasticism on the nature of creaturely life.

There is no better guide to the after-life than Dante. The life of the after-life in the *Commedia* is a political theology, at once rigidly structured and yet coursing with masses of bodies, limbs, fluids, fires, rivers, minerals, and geometric patterns of beatific light. In particular, the *Inferno* gives us

several concise statements concerning the life of the after-life. In the seventh circle, Dante and his guide Virgil come to the ‘burning desert’, upon which a multitude of bodies are strewn about.<sup>1</sup> Among them Dante and Virgil come across Capaneus, one of the seven kings who assaulted Thebes and defied the law of Jove. Capaneus lies stretched out on the burning sand, a rain of fire descending upon him, while he continues his curses against the sovereign. As Virgil explains, Capaneus is one of the blasphemers, grouped with the usurers and sodomites for their crimes against God, State, and Nature. But, as with many of Dante’s depictions in the *Inferno*, there is no redemption, and the punished are often far from being penitential. Their tired, Promethean drama of revolt, defiance, and blasphemy goes on for eternity.

It is easy to read such scenes in a highly anthropomorphic manner. But each individual ‘shade’ that Dante encounters is also associated with a group or ensemble that denotes a category of transgression, and this is especially the case of Middle Hell. Upon entering the gates of the City of Dis, Dante and Virgil are first confronted by a horde of demons, and then by the Furies. Once they are able to pass, they come upon a ‘landscape of open graves’, each one burning and holding within it one of the Heretics. The scene is visually depicted with great drama by Gustav Doré, who, following the prior example of Botticelli, presents the heretics as a mass of twisted, emaciated corpses emerging from their graves. Along the way they also encounter a river of bodies immersed in boiling blood (watched over by a regiment of Centaurs), as well as the ‘wood of suicides’, in

1. Cf. XIV, 22-24: ‘some souls were stretched out flat upon their backs,/others were crouching there all tightly hunched,/some wandered, never stopping, round and round’ (*Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, Penguin, 1984; all citations refer to this edition).

which the bodies of the damned are fused with dead trees (watched over by the Harpies). Within many of the circles, Dante encounters nothing but multiplicity – bustling crowds (the Vestibule of the Indecisive), a cyclone of impassioned bodies (Circle II, the Lustful), a sea of bodies devouring each other (Circle IV, the Wrathful), dismembered bodies (Circle VIII, the Sowers of Discord), and a field of bodies ridden with leprosy (Circle VIII, the Falsifiers). The life-after-life is not only a life of multiplicity, but it is also a life in which the very concept of life continually negates itself, a kind of vitalistic *life-negation* that results in the living dead ‘citizens’ of the City of Dis.

Perhaps, then, one should begin not by thinking about any essence or principle of life, but by thinking about a certain negation of life, a kind of life-after-life in which the ‘after’ is not temporal or sequential, but liminal.

## 2. BLASPHEMOUS LIFE

But we’ve forgotten about blasphemy. What is blasphemy in regard to the forms of life-negation found in the *Inferno*? Returning to the burning desert, Capaneus, noticing Dante’s inquiring gaze, shouts back to him: ‘What I was once, alive, I still am, dead!’<sup>2</sup> On one level this is simply a descriptive statement – defiant towards divine sovereignty in life, I remain so in the after-life. But surely Capaneus realizes that, after life, resistance is futile<sup>3</sup> Or have the terms changed, after life? Perhaps his words do not mean ‘I am still defiant’ but rather, quite literally, something like

2. XIV, 51. An alternate edition by Mandelbaum translates ‘Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto’ thus: ‘That which I was in life, I am in death.’

3. Virgil notes as much, chastising Capaneus for continuing this tirade, his own words becoming his own punishment.

‘I am a living contradiction.’ Such phrases denoting a living-death recur in the *Inferno*, often spoken by Dante himself.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, then, this phrase ‘What I was once, alive, I am still now’ actually means – in the afterlife – that ‘I am still living, even in death.’ This living contradiction – being *living dead* – is also linked to the political-theological contradiction of a power that at once ‘shuts down’ as much as it ‘lets flow’. There is a kind of Medieval biopolitics in the *Inferno* quite different from the modern, Foucauldian version. The strange conjunction of sovereignty and multiplicity in the *Inferno* does not demand the punishment of souls, but instead requires a mass of animated, sensate, living bodies, in some cases resulting in an almost medicalized concept of the after-life (e.g. the Sowers of Discord are meticulously dismembered, dissected, and anatomized). In tandem with a sovereign ‘shutting-down’ we have also a kind of governmental ‘letting-flow’; indeed, at several points the *Inferno* seems to imply their isomorphism.

Blasphemy, then, can be viewed in this regard as the assertion of living contradiction. But this assertion is not simply a resistance to an authoritative demand to be non-contradictory. In its modern variants it strives to become an ontological principle as well. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ‘weird biologies’ of H.P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*.<sup>5</sup> The narrative describes two kinds of blasphemous life. The first involves the discovery of unknown fossils and a ‘Cyclopean city’ in the deep Antarctic, both of which display ‘monstrous perversions of

4. Upon seeing the bestial figure of Satan, Dante notes ‘I did not die – I was not living either!’ (XXXIV, 25).

5. To this one might also add the creatures that inhabit William Hope Hodgson’s *The Night Land* as well as weird tales of authors such as Clark Ashton Smith and Frank Belknap Long.

geometrical laws'.<sup>6</sup> The discovery leads to the remains of an unrecognizable, intelligent species of 'Old Ones' that, in the Lovecraftian mythos, are thought to have lived eons prior to the earliest known human fossilized data.<sup>7</sup>

But this only leads to a further revelation, in which the explorers discover another type of life which they call the Shoggoths and which seem to resemble formless yet geometric patterns: 'viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells – rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile – slaves of suggestion, builders of cities – more and more sullen, more and more intelligent, more and more amphibious, more and more imitative [...]'.<sup>8</sup> In Lovecraft's inimitable prose, the Shoggoths are the alterity of alterity, the species-of-no-species, the biological empty set. When they are discovered to still be alive, they are described sometimes as formless, black ooze, and sometimes as mathematical patterns of organic 'dots', and sometimes as a hurling mass of viscous eyes. Formless, abstract, faceless. In an oft-referenced passage, what the narrator expresses is the horizon of the ability of the human characters to think this kind of 'life':

When Danforth and I saw the freshly glistening and reflectively iridescent black slime which clung thickly to those headless bodies and stank obscenely with that new unknown odor whose cause only a diseased fancy could envisage – clung

6. *At the Mountains of Madness*, in *The Dreams in the Witch-House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Penguin, 2004), 271.

7. One could easily imagine a re-casting of Quentin Meillassoux's 'arche-fossil' in terms of the findings of the Miskatonic University Expedition. See William Dyer et al., 'A Hypothesis Concerning Pre-Archaeon Fossil Data Found Along the Ross Ice Shelf', *The New England Journal of Geological Science*, 44.2 (1936): 1-17.

8. *At the Mountains of Madness*, 330.

to those bodies and sparkled less voluminously on a smooth part of the accursedly resculptured wall in a series of grouped dots – we understood the quality of *cosmic fear* to its uttermost heights.<sup>9</sup>

What Lovecraft puts forth in his tales of cosmic horror is a form of blasphemy that is decidedly non-anthropomorphic and misanthropic. At the mountains of madness we move from a concept of blasphemy as grounded in human agency (the blasphemy of Capaneus in the underworld) to a blasphemy of the unhuman ('more and more amphibious'). For Lovecraft, 'it' is blasphemous – but also indifferent, incomprehensible, and in many cases unnamable ('the thing', 'the doom', 'the fear', 'the whisperer').

At the center of blasphemous life is this idea of the living contradiction. *Blasphemous life is the life that is living but that should not be living*. This contradiction is not a contradiction in terms of medical science; the blasphemous life can often be scientifically explained and yet remain utterly incomprehensible. If it is a logical contradiction, it would have to be one in which the existence of true contradictions would not only be admitted, but would be foundational to any ontology. In logical terms, the assertion that there are true contradictions is often referred to as 'dialetheism'.<sup>10</sup> But with Lovecraft we have a twist. The Shoggoths are bizarre examples of *dialethic biologies*, contradictions that are living precisely because they are contradictory, or 'blasphemous'.

9. *Ibid.*, 331.

10. In its simplest form, dialetheism argues that for any proposition *X*, both *X* and *not-X* are true. Dialetheism therefore works against the Law of Non-Contradiction (articulated in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Gamma), but, in order to avoid accepting absolute relativism, it must also accept some form of paraconsistent logic. For more see Graham Priest, *In Contradiction* (Martinus: Nijhoff, 1987).

Whereas for Dante the blasphemous is the living contradiction – to be living in death, to be living after life – for Lovecraft the blasphemous is the very inability to think ‘life’ as a concept at all. Blasphemy is here rendered as the unthinkable. To account for such blasphemous life, one would have to either compromise existing categories of thought, or entertain contradictory notions such as ‘living numbers’ or ‘pathological life’.

### 3. AMBIENT PLAGUE

The anonymous ‘it’ of blasphemy is also expressed in the hermeneutics of plague and pestilence. Our very concepts regarding the disaster already betray a profound anxiety. That some disasters are ‘natural’ while others are not implies a hypothetical line between the disaster that can be prevented (and thus controlled), and the disaster that cannot. The case of infectious diseases is similar, except that the agency or the activity of this ‘biological disaster’ courses through human beings themselves – within bodies, between bodies, and through the networks of global transit and exchange that form bodies politic. In the U.S., the two-fold conceptual apparatus of ‘emerging infectious diseases’ (naturally-caused) and ‘biodefense’ (artificially-caused) cloaks a generalized militarization of public health. More fundamentally, when it becomes increasingly more difficult to discern the epidemic from the bioweapon, entire relations of enmity are re-cast. The threat is not simply an enemy nation or terrorist group, the threat is itself biological; biological life itself becomes the absolute enemy. Life is weaponized against Life, resulting in an ambient *Angst* towards the biological domain itself.<sup>11</sup>

11. Cf. my article ‘Biological Sovereignty’, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2006-7).

However, while it has become customary to view epidemics in light of post-germ-theory ‘autoimmunity’ boundary disputes, there is a more fundamental problem articulated in the pre-modern concept of plague and pestilence, where biology and theology are always intertwined in the concepts of contagion, corruption, and pollution.<sup>12</sup> One of the central concerns of chroniclers of the Black Death was that of causation, and how that causation was interpreted in relation to the divine.<sup>13</sup> As the Black Death spread throughout Medieval Europe, the motif of the ‘angry God’ recurs in many of the chronicles, both fictional and non-fictional. It forms a key framing-tool for Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, is a motif in *Piers Plowman*, and it shapes the sub-genre of plague pamphlets in England.<sup>14</sup> These in turn make reference to the examples of Biblical plague, of which the most well-known is the Ten Plagues of Egypt, in which God sends down ten ‘plagues’ to persuade the Egyptian pharaoh to free the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup>

12. A great deal of the cultural theory surrounding epidemics has focused on its modern, germ-theory context. Emily Martin’s *Flexible Bodies* (Boston: Beacon, 1994) and Laura Otis’ *Membranes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), provide views from anthropology and literary studies, respectively. Jacques Derrida noted the way in which political conceptualizations of the enemy have, in a post-9/11 era, centered around autoimmune disorders, in which the threat comes from within. See Giovanna Borradori and Jacques Derrida, ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – a Dialogue with Jacques Derrida’, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). However, there is as much to learn from the pre-modern discourse of plague and pestilence, which often de-emphasizes the ontology of interior-exterior in favor of a theology of life and life-after-life.

13. For a survey, see the collection *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, edited by Terrence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14. A particularly good example in this regard is William Bullein’s mid-sixteenth century plague pamphlet, *A Dialogue Against the Fever Pestilence*.

15. *Exodus* 7:14-12:42.

Here the ‘plagues’ do include epidemic disease, but also rivers that turn into blood, swarms of insects, tempestual storms, and an eclipse. Another, more common reference among the Black Death chronicles is apocalyptic. *Revelations*, with its dense and complex symbology, tells of ‘Seven Angels’ sent forth to deliver ‘Seven Plagues’ that are to be ‘poured’ upon mankind as a form of divine judgment; here again the ‘plagues’ range from contagious disease to aberrations in livestock, the weather, and the destruction of human cities.<sup>16</sup>

In all these instances we see this key element: a divine sovereign who, in the form of a judgment and/or punishment, sends down – or better, emanates – a form of miasmatic life that is indissociable from decay, decomposition, and death. What is noteworthy about the pre-modern concept of plague and pestilence is not only its blurring of biology and theology, but the profound lability that the concepts of plague and pestilence have. In the chronicles of the Black Death, plague seems to be at once a separate, quasi-vitalized ‘thing’ and yet something that spreads in the air, in a person’s breath, on their clothes and belongings, even in the glances between people. As one early chronicler notes, ‘one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone’.<sup>17</sup>

It is tempting to understand the Medieval hermeneutics of plague and pestilence as Neoplatonic – a supernatural force emanating from a divine centre. However this would require that we understand the relation between

16. *Revelations* 15-16.

17. See the chronicle of Gabriele de Mussis, translated and collected in *The Black Death*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

Creator and creatures as pathological, a divine sovereign that emanates itself through a miasmatic diffusion of decay. But what is being emanated here is not creation itself but rather its opposite, a kind of de-creation that occupies the underside of what Aristotle called ‘passing away’ (disease, decay, decomposition).<sup>18</sup> This strange type of life, that seems to emanate from a Neoplatonic One and diffuse itself throughout creaturely life, cannot be understood without taking into account another element. As varied as the Medieval accounts of plague and pestilence are, one of the common motifs, along with the angry God, is that of plague and pestilence as a divine weapon. The divine sovereign doesn’t simply pass judgment; the sovereign weaponizes life – the pathological life of ‘plagues’ – and turns it against the earthly life of the creature, which is itself a product of the divine will.

Arguably this motif has its roots in antiquity: in Hesiod, for instance, we see how Zeus sends the ‘gift’ of plague-ridden Pandora to Prometheus as a form of retribution; likewise *The Illiad* opens with an angry Apollo sending down ‘arrows’ of plague upon the armies of men for their disrespect towards the gods. There are earthly instances of this as well. An oft-mentioned example in this regard is the Medieval practice of catapulting corpses. The primal scene in this regard is the fourteenth-century Italian trading post at Caffa, on the northern border of the Black Sea. Ongoing skirmishes between Italian merchants and Muslim locals

18. The motif of decay has been picked up most recently by Reza Negarestani, who discusses ‘decay as a building process’. In a seminar given at Goldsmiths College, Negarestani adopts two approaches to understanding the concept of decay – that of mathematics (derived from Scholasticism as it developed at Oxford) and that of architecture. There is much to expand upon here, particularly in the relation between architecture and resurrection. The ruin may be one conceptual mediation between them.

led, in one instance, to the catapulting of plague-ridden corpses by the latter, over the fortress walls of the former.<sup>19</sup>

All of this is to suggest that the political theology of pestilence is not an issue of shutting-down or 'walling'. It is, certainly, that, but only to an extent. For the pervasive, diffuse, and circulatory quality of pestilence – this 'thing' or 'event' that is at once a divine emanation and yet a source of social and political chaos – raises a more complex problem for sovereign power: *how to control the pervasiveness of pestilence without losing control of the pervasiveness of people*.

But it is not clear in the accounts of chroniclers, or in the texts of Boccaccio, Chaucer, or Langland, if pestilence is that which causes social and political disorder, or if pestilence is continuous with this affective fantasy of total chaos. So we have a strange situation in which pestilence, itself supernaturally caused by a divine, primary sovereign power, then elicits a host of exceptional measures by secondary, earth-bound sovereign actors, in order to ward off the pending and pervasive chaos that pestilence occasions – which itself emanates from the primary, divine sovereignty – the *primum mobile* of pestilence, as it were.

19. Here is De Mussis' account, which is thought by most historians to be second-hand: 'The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside [...] And soon the rotting corpses tainted the air and poisoned the water supply, and the stench was so overwhelming that hardly one in several thousand was in a position to flee the remains of the Tartar army. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defense'. In *The Black Death*, 17.

#### 4. NEKROS

However, it should not be forgotten that the weaponized plague always targets a body or bodies. And what, indeed, is the target of the living weapon, if not the living target – that is, the corpse?

The concept of *nekros* has two significant meanings in classical culture. On the one hand, *nekros* is the corpse or the dead body. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, when Odysseus organizes the funeral rites for one of his companions, it is the *nekros* that is burned at the grave site: 'Once we'd burned the dead man (*nekros*) and the dead man's (*nekrou*) armour,/ heaping his grave-mound, hauling a stone that coped it well,/we planted his balanced oar aloft to crown his tomb.'<sup>20</sup> Certainly *nekros* names the singularity of the departed life, or of life recently departed from the body, leaving behind a corpse. But this corpse retains something residual of that life, insofar as both the corpse and its armor are together set upon the grave. We might even say that *nekros* not only names the 'dead man', but also the thingness of the corpse. In a sense *nekros* oscillates between the body-minus-life and the thingness of the corpse, the latter approaching the domain of the purely non-living (e.g., the armor as the non-living body).

However the *Odyssey* also contains another, more significant usage of *nekros*. This comes in the well-known passages recounting Odysseus' journey to the underworld. In this scene Odysseus first performs a sacrificial rite that calls to the dead, who then emerge from the underworld in a kind of slow-motion swarming:

And once my vows and prayers had invoked the nations of the dead (*ethnea nekron*), I took the victims, over the trench I

20. *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin), XII.13-15.

cut their throats and the dark blood flowed in – and up out of Erebus they came, flocking toward me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone (*nekuôn kataethnêôtôn*)<sup>21</sup>

Here *nekros* no longer names the corpse, nor even the thingness of the corpse. Instead, *nekros* names something alive, or at least vitalized – but in a way fundamentally different from the life of *zoê*. *Nekros* as the corpse presumes a reliable boundary between life and death, whereas *nekros* as ‘the dead’ are characterized by an ambivalent vitalism. These dead souls are detained souls, they are immaterial yet non-transcendent, a life that at once continues to live on but that lives on in a kind of interminable, vacuous, immortality. *Nekros* is thus not the corpse but rather ‘the dead’, or the existence of a life-after-life.

But what, if anything, ‘lives on’ after life? Paul provides what would become a center of dispute in later theological debates over resurrection. The mortal body, like all living things, displays an infusion of life-spirit as well as processes of growth. ‘But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body [...] So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable [...] It is sown a natural body: it is raised a spiritual body.’<sup>22</sup> The organicist motif of resurrection is that of a seed that is sown in the earth and that grows and is animated (or re-animated) into a new body, the latter being both the resurrection of the person as well as that of the community of the *corpus mysticum*.

There is also a great deal of ambiguity in the Pauline formula. Patristic thinkers differed on what kind of

life-after-life resurrection was, and how such a supernatural form of life was to take place.<sup>23</sup> One set of debates centres around the problem of the temporality of resurrection. If the living, mortal, earthbound body was susceptible to the processes of growth and decay, then in what material state would the body be resurrected? What kind of life returns? Would the resurrected body – the life-after-life – live in a state of perpetual stasis (as a kind of ‘living statue’), or does it still undergo transformations, either in the form of higher perfections, or in terms of a beatific hypergrowth? The so-called material continuity debates among Patristic thinkers not only highlights the problem of time in relation to life and after-life, but it points to a problem that cuts across the theological and political domains (for instance, when Paul lays out the basic anatomy of the *corpus mysticum* as constituted both by unity and by participation).

Resurrection could be resurrection of the body, the soul, or more generally of ‘the dead’. But even theories of the resurrection of the soul – as one finds in Origen’s notion of a ‘spiritual body’ – still maintain the minimal necessity of a body-in-flux. The problems of material continuity are also linked to spatial and topological problems concerning the material process by which the formless body of decay and putrefaction is re-assembled and re-vitalized. The mere return of material particles does not constitute resurrection, for those particles must be either ensouled, renewed, or in some way cast anew. And here the almost absurdist debates concerning ‘chain consumption’ come into the foreground. If the corpse undergoes decay and decomposition into so many particles and non-living matter, if the

21. Ibid., XI.38-42.

22. I Corinthians 15.38, 42, 44, New International Version.

23. The most sophisticated account of such debates remains Caroline Walker Bynum’s study *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

corpse is devoured by worms and beasts, and those beasts devoured by man, how can the parts or particles of the body be re-assembled? (One can imagine a solution to this problem offered by Jarry's Ubu ...). One partial resolution, offered by Tertullian, was to shift emphasis from the matter to the form of the resurrected body, so that continuity could exist through change. Cannibalism thus does not negate continuity, and the living dead can also be the eaten dead.

The theological debates over resurrection point to some basic dichotomies: should the organicist model of the growth and decay of the natural world (seeds, plants, animals) serve as the analogical model for resurrection, or are those processes precisely what resurrection aims to correct and to 'heal'? Such questions have to do, in effect, with the nature and the supernatural of the after-life, or better, with the relation between life and a 'life-plus-something' that constitutes the early Medieval theology and later Scholastic onto-theology. Insofar as the after-life is related in some way – as analogy, as model, as perfection – to finite, mortal life, it obtains a certain familiarity that enables thinkers such as Origen to talk at length about growth and decay in a theological context. But insofar as the after-life is a supernatural phenomenon, a divine and sovereign action, it remains outside the scope of philosophical and even theological inquiry.

How can life – something that is presumably *lived* – be situated at such a point of inaccessibility? Discussing the role of the supernatural in the eighteenth-century gothic novel, literary critic S.L. Varnado suggests that the aesthetics of the gothic novel revolve around a confrontation with the divine as an experience of horror. Varnado uses the theological term 'numinous' to describe this experience, the

limit-experience of 'absolute otherness'. In gothic fictions, the numinous is ephemeral; it can either be revealed to have natural and rational causes (as in Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), or the supernatural can be affirmed, and its horror sublimated into an affirmation of faith (Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*) or a descent into damnation (Lewis's *The Monk*).

The concept of the numinous is etymologically associative to the Kantian concept of *noumena*. Kant's own re-affirmation of the split between *phenomena* (the world as it appears to the subject) and *noumena* (the inaccessible world-in-itself) tended to draw his analyses towards the former and away from the latter. Indeed, there is a sense in which Kant's antinomies of pure reason – God, the universe, the soul – are pushed so far away from *phenomena* that they begin to occupy a space not that far from *noumena*.<sup>24</sup> And yet it is precisely this domain – the anonymous 'there is' – that has for so long remained a point of attraction for ontology.

Let us consider a conceptual portmanteau, comprising the gothic 'numinous' (the horror of the divine as absolute otherness) and Kantian *noumena* (the unhuman, anonymous 'in-itself'). In what sense is the *nekros*, as 'the dead', also a kind of *nouminous life*? A nouminous life would have to articulate a conceptual space that is neither that which is lived and outside of discourse (the gothic 'numinous'), nor that which is purely reasoned and unlived (the Kantian antinomies). We could call this a 'horror of life' if such a phrase did

24. Kant, in the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, notes the following: 'God knows all things as they are in themselves a priori and immediately through an intuitive understanding. For he is the being of all beings and every possibility has its ground in him. If we were to flatter ourselves so much as to claim that we know the modum noumenon, then we would have to be in community with God so as to participate immediately in the divine ideas [...] To expect this in the present life is the business of mystics and theosophists [...] Fundamentally Spinozism could just as well be called a great fanaticism as a form of atheism' (trans. Allen Wood and Gertrude Clark, Cornell University Press, 1978, 86).

not bring with it undue anthropomorphic and even existentialist connotations. Perhaps we can say that, if the life-after-life is a noumenous life, it is because it elicits a *noumenal* horror that is the horror of a life that indifferently ‘lives on’.

## 5. THE SPIRIT OF BIOLOGY

The relationship between theology and horror in the West invites a number of superficial comparisons: in the Eucharist there is both cannibalism and vampirism; in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions the realization of the City of God always entails resurrection of the dead; and in numerous instances the New Testament portrays the various demons and demonic possessions that elicit the healing powers of the Messiah. Indeed, considering the extent to which genre horror deals with the themes of death, resurrection, and the divine and demonic, one could argue that genre horror is a secular, cultural expression of the theological concerns.

If we look more closely, however, we see that in many instances it is a concept of ‘life’ that mediates between theology and horror. We can even imagine our theologians carefully watching the classics of early twentieth-century horror film: the relation between the natural and the supernatural (Aquinas watching *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*); the distinction or non-distinction between human and beast (Augustine watching *The Wolf Man* or *Cat People*); the coherence or incoherence of the *corpus mysticum* (Paul watching *Revolt of the Zombies* or *I Bury the Living*); the problem of the afterlife (Dante watching the Italian silent film version of *L’Inferno*). But one need not imagine such scenarios, for many so-called art-horror films deal with such issues, from David Cronenberg’s early ‘tissue horror’

films, to Ingmar Bergman’s *Through a Glass Darkly*, to Dario Argento’s now-complete ‘Three Mothers’ trilogy.

If both theology and horror deal with the concept of ‘life’, then what exactly is this ‘life’ that lies at the limits of the thinkable? Aristotle gives us one clue. In the *De anima* Aristotle explicitly thinks the question of life as an ontological question, through the concept of *psukhê*: ‘It must be the case then that soul (*psukhê*) is substance as the form of a natural body which potentially has life, and since this substance is actuality, soul will be the actuality of such a body.’<sup>25</sup> There is, to borrow terms that Scholasticism would favor, an ‘ensoulment’ or animation that thus takes place in hylomorphism, a process through which life is literally formed (or in-formed ... and sometimes de-formed).

However Aristotle gives us a slightly different picture in the *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Here the central question is not about any principle of life, but rather about the problem of morphology. Aristotle asks, how are ‘coming-to-be’ and ‘passing-away’ different from alteration in general? Are growth and decay merely examples of the larger genre of change in itself? This in turn leads to a more fundamental question regarding the domain of the living: ‘What is that which grows?’<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle’s approach is to distinguish between different modalities of change. There are, first, the processes of alteration, which are qualitative (one thinks of a tree sprouting branches or an animal growing fur – the tree or animal remains the same kind of tree or animal).

25. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin, 1986), II.1.412a, 157.

26. Trans. Harold Joachim, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), I.5.321a.30, 489.

There are also the processes of coming-to-be and passing-away, which are substantial changes (as when one animal is eaten by another animal, the former undergoing modification in substance). Finally, there are the processes of growth and decay, which can involve changes in magnitude (growing larger or smaller).<sup>27</sup> Now, while the first two are general processes of change that occur in the living and non-living, Aristotle implies that growth and decay are exclusive to the domain of the living. Why is this? One of the reasons Aristotle provides is that growth and decay, though exclusive to the living, fundamentally have to do with changes across the substance of the living and non-living, changes that may be due to ‘the accession of something, which is called food’ and is said to be ‘contrary to flesh’, and that involves the ‘transformation of this food into the same form as that of flesh’.<sup>28</sup>

To Aristotle’s example of nutrition we might also include the processes of decay and decomposition, the reverse passage of *nekros* into non-living matter. Food for worms ... But might we also include another passage, that of *nekros* into the life-after-life? What sort of change would this be – alteration, coming-to-be/passing-away, or growth/decay? Would this constitute a kind of biology of spiritual transformation, or would it constitute the ‘spirit of biology’?

What horror explicitly thinks, theology implicitly admits: a profound fissure at the heart of the concept of ‘life’. Life is at once this or that particular instance of the living, but also that which is common to each and every

27. ‘We must explain (i) wherein growth differs from coming-to-be and from alteration’, and (ii) what is the process of growing and the process of diminishing in each and all of the things that grow and diminish’ (Ibid., I.5.320a.9-12, 485).

28. Ibid., I.5.321b.36-322a.1-3, 490.

instance of the living. Let us say that the former is ‘the living’, while the latter is ‘Life’ (capital L). If the living are particular manifestations of Life (or that-which-is-living), then Life in itself is never simply this or that instance of the living, but something like a principle of life (or that-by-which-the-living-is-living). This fissure between Life and the living is Aristotelian in origin, but the fissure only becomes apparent in particular instances – we see it in the Scholastic attempt to conceptualize ‘spiritual creatures’, we see it in the problem of the life-after-life of resurrection, and we also see it in natural philosophy and the attempts to account for teratological anomalies and aberrations.

However, the most instructive examples come from classical horror film, in particular the ‘creature features’ of film studios such as Universal or RKO. The proliferation of living contradictions in horror film constitutes our modern bestiary. Let us consider a hagiography of life in the relation between theology and horror. The living dead, the undead, the demon-beast, and the phantasm. Each of these are *repudiations* of life, but not their full negation. Life is repudiated in favor of an ambivalent and ‘nouminous’ after-life. Each also takes up a certain relation between life and the political, centered around a key concept that structures its own genre conventions. The table overleaf provides a brief summary.

	LIVING DEAD	UNDEAD	DEMON- BEAST	PHANTASM
Exemplar	The zombie	The vampire	Demonic possession; lycanthropy	The ghost, the specter
Allegory	Working class, the mob, mass	Aristocratic, Romanticism	Bourgeois, the therapeutic	Divine-religious, the spirit, the soul
Avatars	Multitude, contagion	Blood, rats, bats, mist	Beast, animal, monster, chimera	Mediums, portents, signs
Ontology	Flesh	Blood	Meat	Spirit

Tables such as this obviously have their limitations. But one thing to note is that in each case we have a form of life that at once repudiates ‘life itself’ for some form of after-life. Each of these figures are literally living contradictions. The zombie is the animated corpse, the vampire is the decadence of immortality, the demon is at once a supernatural being and a lowly beast, and the specter exists through materializations of its immateriality. And, in each case, the form of after-life works towards a concept of life that is itself constituted by a privation or a negation, a ‘life-minus-something’; the basic Aristotelian (and Hippocratic) concepts of flesh, blood, meat, and spirit are paradoxically living but without life. In this sense, *horror expresses the logic of incommensurability between Life and the living*.

## 6. UNIVOCAL CREATURES

One of the peculiarities of Aristotle’s *De anima* is that, while it opens with the stated aim of inquiring into the ‘principle of life’, it quickly bypasses this aim in favor of detailed analyses of the natural world, the senses, and the intellect. What ostensibly begins with an investigation into the ontology of *zoê* ends with a rather opaque meditation on *nous*. It is almost as if Aristotle discovers that the question of ‘life’ can only be ontological if it ceases to be a question of life-as-such. This has also coloured later glosses on the text, such as those by Averröes and Aquinas, whose commentaries are themselves characterized by this shift.<sup>29</sup>

In Book II, however, Aristotle makes some important distinctions. After having offered the concept of *psukhê* as the life-principle, Aristotle distinguishes between different types of *psukhê* – that is, that *psukhê* is itself manifested in a range of specific forms. As is well-known, Aristotle distinguishes between plants, animals, and humans, based on the manifestation of *psukhê* or the life-form that governs them. While plants are characterized by a nutritive *psukhê*, animals are characterized by a sensory and motile *psukhê*, and humans by a reasoning or intellective *psukhê*. This forms an ascending order, for whereas plants are governed by nutrition, they can neither move nor think. The same follows for animals, since they lack reason.

The Aristotelian distinction was, of course, surpassed by the growth of natural history and, later, the emergence of a separate field of biology. But while the modern life sciences have analyzed the domain of the living down to

29. Averröes’ notion of the ‘material Intellect’, as well as the Thomist distinction between existence and essence, can be regarded as attempts to smooth over the transition in the *De anima* between the question of ‘life’ and the question of thought.

the smallest molecule, the Aristotelian concept of a 'life principle' remains contested terrain.<sup>30</sup> In particular, one issue left unresolved in the *De anima* has to do with the concept of *psukhê* itself. Is there one, univocal *psukhê* that cuts across different domains of the living? Does *psukhê* in effect emanate from its ideal center towards the multitude of individual life forms? Or is there a *psukhê* that is proper to each individual, constituting a kind of propriety to *psukhê*?

The Scholastic reception of Aristotle offers a number of responses, and, ironically, forms an important chapter in the philosophy of biology. However, before Aristotle's 'biological' works make their appearance in the twelfth century via Arabic translations, there were already attempts to indirectly think Life as a name of the divine. The creature, emblematic of the domain of the living, is always a symptom. It is an effect, a product – as Bonaventure would put it, a *vestigium* or 'footprint' of the divine. The world of the living is a *liber creaturae*. Life is precisely that which is symptomatic of the divine, though it is not of the divine itself.

But it is Aquinas who both synthesizes the various positions on the creature and emphasizes that the concept of the creature revolves around the relation between Creator and creature, supernatural and natural, light and mud. In his attempts to wed Aristotelianism with Christian doctrine, Aquinas offers a neat summary of what we might call the 'creaturely triad'. What is the relation between the creature and Creator, between the living and the divine Life that make the living possible? Aquinas first sets up a dichotomy

30. The differing positions of genetic determinism, biocomplexity, developmental systems biology, and the various branches of cognitive science today raise these questions.

between two approaches, that of *equivocity* and that of *univocity*. In the first, there is no relation between creature and Creator, and the divine remains forever outside the possibility of being thought. In the second – univocity – there is a relation of continuity between creature and Creation, such that, in extreme cases, the latter can be said to be co-existent with and immanent in the former. The problems with each, from Aquinas' position, are easy to see. While equivocity forecloses any possibility of thinking or experiencing the divine, univocity makes it too easy, in effect flattening the divine onto nature. As is well-known, the solution offered by Aquinas is that of *analogy*. Between no relation (equivocity) and pure relation (univocity), there is partial relation, or analogy. Thus the creature is analogous to the Creator, their difference articulated in the form of degrees of perfection ('proportion' and 'proportionality'). The creature is the life that is less-than-divine, the Creator is the life that is more-than-the-living.

Might we also then say that, for Aquinas, the living are analogously related to Life? Aristotle's question of 'life' and the life-principle cannot be asked of Life as such. It can only be asked of the living, of something 'beyond' the living or that forms the living. But then we would have to consider 'life' in general as a kind of negative concept, a concept that at once asserts its asking as it recedes into the background of this question.

This negative concept of life is ontologized along two axes. The first is predicated on ontological difference. It posits a distinction, as we noted previously, between 'Life' and 'the living'. The *De anima* posits *psukhê* as a general life-principle, but at the same time distinguishes it from particular instances of the living in plant, animal, and human

life. Everything hinges on the relation between Life and the living. In the period of high Scholasticism, the spectrum of creation, from monotheism to pantheism, from orthodoxy to heresy, illustrates the way in which the question of Life is never far from the question of the nature of the divine. In this sense the *De anima* is ontologically prior to texts such as *De Partibus Animalium* and *Historia Animalium*.

The non-concept of life is also aligned on a second axis, on which it is predicated on a distinction between a 'principle of life' and its corresponding 'boundaries of articulation' (this is its essence and existence, substance and accident). The principle of life may vary quite widely, from *psukhê* to a theological soul, to modern mechanism and/or 'vital spirit', to contemporary concepts of molecule, gene, and information. But it always makes possible one or more boundary relations that, when applied to the domain of the living, re-affirm the principle of life as essence. Such boundaries include, first and foremost, that between the living and the non-living. Secondary ones include the division between the organic and inorganic, and between human and animal.

## 7. PATHOLOGICAL IMMANENCE

Arguably, the modern concept that has done the most to steer the question of life away from ontology has been that of the organism. Only when the relation between Life and the living can be encapsulated in the architecture of the organism, can the question of life emerge from its Scholastic hiding place into an epistemologically-rooted 'life science'.

But even in the life sciences there are innumerable instances of life-beyond-life, instances of 'the living' that turn back upon the hidden ontological question of Life.

For example, the emergence of a science of pathology – what Foucault, discussing pathological anatomy in the early nineteenth century, describes as the study of 'pathological life' – already points to the complicated way in which the question of *what* life is quickly folds onto the notion *that* life is. Foucault identifies several aspects to pathology – is it the study of the disease-in-itself, the disease as it is manifested in the patient, or the disease within a set of environmental conditions? Pathological anatomy signals an innovation because it not only posits that decay and decomposition are themselves processes of life, but that they exhibit characteristics that make them more than simply the inverse of growth, development, or the healthy state.

With the emergence of modern germ theory (Koch, Pasteur), the concept of immunity (Metchnikoff), and an epidemiology driven by political economy (Snow's cholera maps of London), the question becomes even more dense: not only are there distinct processes of after-life (decay, decomposition, putrefaction), but these are abetted by a host of life-forms that themselves resist easy classification within biology.<sup>31</sup> The concept of pathology is an after-life, in so far as it asks us to think Aristotle's distinction between growth and decay, coming-to-be and passing-away, in a single thought. Today, the study of pathology is often divided along sub-disciplinary lines that betray interesting assumptions: while virologists bracket the roles of environment and transmission, focusing on the pathogenic organism, epidemiologists black-box the pathogenic organism, emphasizing environment and a statistical approach that is biopolitically tied to public health.

31. For example, in modern debates over whether viruses are living. For a perceptive overview, see Lynn Margulis' book *Symbiotic Planet* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

This last dichotomy is instructive, for it suggests to us several forms of after-life. As an organism, as a member of ‘the living’, the pathogenic organism (viruses, bacteria, fungi) can be situated broadly within the post-Darwinian *liber creaturae*. But, as we know, it is the very nature of such organisms to pass between life forms – to pass through, to pass between, and even, in cases of genetic mutation, to pass beyond. The means by which this is achieved are through processes that innately question the autonomy of the living organism – infection, transfection, parasitism, symbiosis. This in turn opens onto another, quite different form of after-life, one where the locality of ‘the living’ tends to become unlocalized, diffuse, distributed, and even invisible, tending towards an abstract domain in which ‘the living’ comes to overlap with ‘Life’.

This is precisely the terrain explored by Deleuze, and the point of reference here is the Scholastic concept of the creature. *A setting of the creaturely life within an ontology of immanence* – perhaps this is the tension at the heart of Deleuze’s own, peculiar form of vitalism. Deleuze’s emphasis on the nonorganic life that altogether bypasses biological categorisation is often coupled with an equal emphasis on that which is alive, and not simply on that which exists. Though Deleuze, in his own writings and with Guattari, does make frequent references to the history of biology (e.g. the Cuvier-Geoffroy debate, Jacob and genetics, animal ethology), it is really in the context of Scholasticism that this type of Deleuzian biophilosophy can be identified.

In his lectures at Vincennes, Deleuze will often re-cast the Scholastic triad of analogy-equivocity-univocity in terms of another triad, that of transcendence-emanence-immanence. While Deleuze’s admiration for Spinoza is well-known, it is

Duns Scotus who plays a pivotal role in the passage between the Neoplatonic emphasis on emanation and ‘participation’, and Spinoza’s assertion of immanence, encapsulated in his famous phrase *Deus sive natura* (‘God or nature’).<sup>32</sup> The very problem of creation, and of the relation between Creator and creature, must presuppose a relation of continuity, even though a ‘formal objective distinction’ can still be made between the two: ‘In the concept of a creature, however, no notion or species will be found to represent something proper to God which is wholly different in nature from anything pertaining to a creature.’<sup>33</sup> For Duns Scotus (in the ‘strong’ reading via Deleuze), nothing can be thought through the creature which is not univocally thought of the divine; the natural always implicates within itself the super-natural, life the after-life.

For Deleuze, the central ontological issue is thus not that of transcendence *vs* immanence, but rather of a different tension: that between *emanence* and immanence. The former produces immanent effects, but such effects emanate from a source that remains above and beyond those effects; emanence of effects implies an eminence of cause. Not surprisingly, Deleuze favors immanence, in which the effect is immanent in the cause. Deleuze expands the term ‘expression’, borrowed from Spinoza, to describe this creaturely immanence, essentially flattening out the

32. Scotus, in the *Opus oxoniense*, notes that ‘a species which can be multiplied in more than one individual, is not of itself determined to any certain number of individuals but is compatible with an infinity of individuals. This is evident in the case of all perishable species. Therefore, if the perfection of necessary existence can be multiplied in more than one individual, it is not of itself restricted to any certain number, but is compatible with infinity (trans. Allen Wolter, in *Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings*, Hackett, 1987, I., dist.II, q.iii, 88).

33. *Ibid.*, I, dist. III, q.i, 29.

‘divisions of nature’ first formalized by Eriugena into a single, univocal, immanent expression: ‘In the limit Nature as a whole is a single Animal in which only the relations between the parts vary.’<sup>34</sup>

If this notion of expressive immanence is, as Badiou notes, a ‘vitalist ontology’, is it vitalist because of what it says about ‘Life’ or for what it says about ‘the living’? What, indeed, does vitalism come to mean in Deleuze’s biophilosophy, if not a kind of subtractive vitalism, one that posits a creature-without-creation, an emanation-without-center, a decay that is growth, and a collapsing of ‘Life’ and ‘the living’; a distinction that structures both the Aristotelian and Scholastic concepts of life? If pathology broadly names one kind of life-after-life (growth-in-decay, coming-to-be in passing-away), a pathological immanence would name one of the central – unresolved – problematics of Deleuzian vitalism: that of the relation between ‘life’ and ‘immanence’. If the former presumes some level of dynamic change (even if that change occurs immanently), the latter requires the existence of a fully actual, non-dynamic diffusion, enmeshing, or blanketing. The limit-point, the pathological turn, is at that point where immanence becomes so absolute that it becomes ambient and pervasive, itself receding into a zone of non-life.

## 8. LIFE AS NON-BEING

What is striking about many of the attempts to ontologize life is the way in which ‘life’ becomes an always-receding horizon. If we accept the Aristotelian distinction between Life and the living as structuring the philosophy of life in

34. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone, 1990), 278.

the West, then it would seem that Life is always receding behind the living. This is the limit of natural philosophy, beyond which one must have recourse to either natural theology or what Kant calls onto-theology, the system of knowledge of the ‘being-of-all-beings’.

But, in the tradition of Aristotelian natural philosophy, Life is not simply the absent center to every instance of the living. The relation between Life and the living is that, while the former conceptually guarantees the latter, in itself it is never available to thought. This, however, does not mean that Life is a concept of negation because it is privative, for its lack of ‘thisness’ is precisely what exceeds any particular instance of the living. If Life has a negative value, then, it is because of its superlative nature, because it exceeds any instance of the living. Any critique of life would have to begin from this presupposition of the superlative nature of Life. Life is ‘nothing’ precisely because it is never some thing.

In this sense, philosophical thinking about life borrows heavily from the tradition of mystical theology – and in particular from the tradition of negative theology. Before Anselm offers his famous ontological proof for the existence of God (God as ‘that beyond which nothing greater can be thought’), the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena provides one of the most elaborate theories of the divine as ‘nothing’ (*nihil*). Eriugena’s *Periphyseon* is deeply influenced by the apophatic approach of the Pseudo-Dionysius. But the *Periphyseon* applies a dialectical rigor not found in the latter’s works. In Book III, Eriugena puts forth a notion of the ‘divine darkness’, in which the divine is *nihil* precisely because of its superlative nature: ‘For everything that is understood and sensed is nothing else but the

apparition of what is not apparent, the manifestation of the hidden, the affirmation of the negated, the comprehension of the incomprehensible [...]’<sup>35</sup>

To what extent can we say that Life is *nihil* in this sense? Once the ontological difference between ‘Life’ and ‘the living’ is collapsed, life subtracts from itself any possibility of an affirmation. What remains is a kind of negative theology, or better, a negative theo-zoology, whereby life always displays some relation to the negation of life. Hence the after-life is not about the dichotomy between life and death, but about a more fundamental relation – that between Life and Being.

One problem has to do with what happens once the concept of ‘Life’ detaches itself from ‘the living’. This is a problem implicit in the *De anima*, where the concept of *psukhê* is sometimes a life-principle, and sometimes a stand-in for the being of form itself. In a modern context, process philosophy (Bergson, Whitehead) and process theology (Chardin, Steiner) likewise reach a zone in which ‘Life’ becomes convertible with Being – even if the name of Life is process or becoming.

For many, however, all of this is a false problem. The opening sections of *Being and Time* provide what is perhaps the clearest statement on this point. There Heidegger effectively glosses over the fields of anthropology, psychology, and biology as fields which must presume being in order to begin their inquiries about man, mind, and organism. While each of these fields, according to Heidegger, deals in some way with Life, none of them are capable of posing the

35. Book III, 633A, from Iohannis Scotti Erivgenae, *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*, *Liber Tertius*, ed. and trans. I.P. Sheldon-Williams with the collaboration of Ludwig Bieler (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1981).

question of Life as an ontological question:

[...] in any serious and scientifically minded ‘philosophy of life’ (this expression says about as much as the ‘botany of plants’) there lies an inexplicit tendency toward understanding the being of Da-sein. What strikes us first of all in such a philosophy (and this is its fundamental lack) is that ‘life’ itself as a kind of being does not become a problem ontologically.<sup>36</sup>

This ‘missing ontological foundation’ is itself what grounds these fields. The question *that* Life is, is displaced by the question of *what* Life is – or, more accurately, what the domain of the living is. The anthropological category of man, the psychological category of mind, and a general biology of the organism all presume a Being of Life. Where Heidegger leaves off, however, is at the question of whether Life is a species of Being, or whether the ontology of Life in effect transforms Life into Being. His last words on the topic are at once suggestive and opaque: ‘Life has its own kind of being, but it is essentially accessible only in Da-sein.’<sup>37</sup>

One point of entry is to think about non-Life (a non-Life that is not Death), and by extension, non-Being (a non-Being that is not Nothing). Put another way, the challenge would be to think the relation between Life and Being as mediated by negation. This is, to be sure, an ancient problem, one posed by the presocratics, in the attempt to secure a conceptually-sound concept of the One or the Many. At its root is the problem – really, the profound ambivalence towards – the concept of non-Being. As Levinas notes, in a language not too far removed from Eriugena:

36. *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), §10, 43-44.

37. *Ibid.*, 46.

When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence [...] But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer this or that; there is not 'something'. But this universal absence is in turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence [...] There is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the problem of non-Being is not simply that of a fear of nothingness or of the vacuum. Rather, it is the quite gothic fear of a something whose thingness is under question. 'This impersonal, anonymous, yet indistinguishable consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term there is [...] The rustling of the there is [...] is horror.<sup>39</sup> The pinnacle of this type of horror – really a kind of concept-horror – is the evisceration of all noological interiority: 'horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua entity, inside out.'<sup>40</sup>

What is the 'there is' of Life? Is the concept of Life already a 'there is', and therefore already enveloped in the gothic horror of absolute otherness and pervasive anonymity? If 'Life', as opposed to 'the living', is always receding into the anonymous 'there is', does this then mean that Life is really Life-without-Being?

38. 'There is: Existence without Existents', in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Scán Hand (London: Blackwell, 1990), 30.

39. *Ibid.*, 30; 32.

40. *Ibid.*, 33.

## 9. ANONYMOUS HORROR

Granted, there is a certain absurdity in asking about the non-being of Life; one might as well inquire into non-existent creatures ... which is, of course, precisely what the domain of supernatural horror does. Horror film is replete with examples of the horror of the 'there is ...' The titles of such films are telling: *The Being*, *The Creature*, *The Entity*, *It's Alive!*, *It Lives Again*, *Monster Zero*, *The Stuff*, *Them!*, *The Thing*, and so on. In these films, the site of horror is not simply that of a physically threatening monster, for at least these can be given names (Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, Wolf-Man), and thereby included within the sphere of moral and theological law. This also means they can be destroyed. But what of the creature that cannot be named, or that is named in its unnamability? The unnamable creature is also the unthinkable creature. This would be the B-horror version of Beckett's *L'innommable*. In some cases the unnamable creature is without form, the intrusion of a raging, inverted hylomorphism. Cold War films such as *The Blob* and *Caltiki the Immortal Monster* exist in a state of oozing, abject, borderlessness. In other cases the unnamable creature is without matter, existing as pure (demonic) spirit, an inverted theophany. In *Fiend Without A Face*, human beings are besieged by immaterial, brainstem-like entities, suggesting telepathy as a form of contagion.<sup>41</sup>

These films represent a subtle subversion of the classic creature-feature by shifting the criteria by which a monster is made. Whereas the creature-feature films define the monster as an aberration (and abomination) of nature, the unnamable creature is an aberration of thought.

41. In postmodernity this tradition is extended in films such as Mario Bava's *Planet of the Vampires*, Cronenberg's *Scanners* and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cure*.

The classical creature-features still retain an element of familiarity, despite the impure mixture of categories (plant + human) or differences in scale (giant reptiles, ants, leeches, etc.). Films featuring unnamable creatures, by contrast, contextualize the monster in terms of ontology (form-without-matter, matter-without-form) or in terms of onto-theology (the spiritual abject, the oozing abstraction). They point towards a form of life-after-life that highlights conceptual aberrations.

Let us pause for a moment and gather together our propositions concerning this concept-horror, or, granting ourselves some poetic license, what we can also refer to as the ‘teratological noosphere’:

- The question of an ontology of life is traditionally predicated on a fundamental distinction between Life and the living, or, between that-by-which-the-living-is-living and that-which-is-living.
- This distinction is deployed along two axes: One which requires a ‘principle-of-life’ to structure all manifestations of the living, and another in which the living is in turn structured according to various ‘boundaries of articulation’.
- In the context of Scholasticism, the ontology of life continually oscillates between a natural philosophy of creatures and an onto-theology of the divine nature.
- The structure of the concept of life is most often that of negative theology.

Each of these propositions structures the basic way in which ‘life’ as a concept is thought as such. Each of these also contain one or more fissures, one or more ‘heretical’ strands

of thinking. To this we can offer another proposition:

- In its traditional onto-theological formulations, Life is what is denied of Being. While the latter is the domain of the transcendent, the eternal, the infinite, the spiritual, and the fully actual, the former is subtracted from this – the immanent, the temporal, the finite, the material, and the virtual.

Life therefore bears some minimal relation to non-Being. But this can take several forms. The non-Being of Life can be situated either ‘above’ or ‘below’ the scale of the human – on the one hand there is the strata of Thomist ‘spiritual creatures’ or the strata of Aristotelian creaturely life, while on the other hand there is the strata of demonic multitudes or the strata of subhuman plague and pestilence. This non-anthropomorphic and even misanthropic quality of Life sustains these strata with a certain inaccessibility. Even as Life, in conditioning the living, is able to assert its self-evident character, it also puts forth its noumenal qualities. Kant’s statements concerning the teleology of the natural world would have to be qualified: *it is because Life is noumenal that it is teleological*. But this then means that the ‘ends’ of Life are also ‘anonymous’.

Any question of the possibility of an ontology of life would have to consider ‘life’ as a particular intersection between a biology of a non-conceptual life itself and an onto-theology of transcendence, emanence, and immanence. The problem is that the concept of Life has remained tenaciously non-conceptual, even as it continues to function in a conceptual, even ontological way in contemporary scientific fields such as network science, swarm intelligence, and biocomplexity. The issue is not that Life cannot think its own

## COLLAPSE IV

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foundationalism, its own decision. Indeed, this is arguably what post-Darwinian biology obsesses over. Rather, the issue is that Life as a concept must always presume a further question concerning Being. The infamous question ‘What is Life?’ appears to be always superseded by the question of ‘What is Being?’ And yet the very idea of Life-without-Being would seem to be an absurdity for philosophy – though, as we’ve seen, not for horror.

## Czech Forest

Rafani

Cutouts – illustrations, 170 x 50 cm (2002).



**Naše dobrá vůle skončila  
v roce 1938**

‘Our goodwill ended in 1938.’



**Jen s pocitem naplňované  
spravedlnosti**

‘Only with a feeling of fulfilled justice.’



**Je to skutečně novostavba  
na půdě panenské**

'It is truly new building on virgin soil.'



**Heim ins Reich**



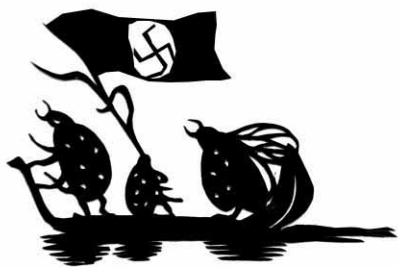
**Vůči němcům pociťují Češi  
hlubokou hořkost**

‘Czechs feel deep bitterness towards Germans.’



**Němec zůstal naším  
nesmiřitelným nepřítelem**

‘The German remains our irreconcilable enemy’



**I německé ženy a hitlerovská  
mládež nesou vinu  
na zločinech němců**

‘Even German women and Hitler youth carry the guilt  
of German Crimes.’



**Na hřbitově je místa dost**

‘There is enough space in the graveyard.’



**Nepřestaň nenávidět němce**

‘Never stop hating Germans.’



**Spravedlivě, ale nesmlouvavě**

‘Just, but uncompromising.’



**Chovej se k němci jako vítěz**

‘Treat the German like the victor you are’

### M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire *Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and and/or or?*

China Miéville

#### 0. PROLOGUE: THE TENTACULAR NOVUM

Taking for granted, as we do, its ubiquitous cultural debris, it is easy to forget just how radical the Weird was at the time of its convulsive birth.<sup>1</sup> Its break with previous fantastics is vividly clear in its teratology, which renounces all folkloric or traditional antecedents. The monsters of high Weird are indescribable and formless *as well as being* and/or *although they are* and/or *in so far as they are* described with an excess of specificity, an accursed share of impossible somatic precision; and their constituent bodyparts are disproportionately insectile/cephalopodic, without mythic resonance. The spread of the tentacle – a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in ‘Western’ aesthetics) – from a situation of near total absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Lovecraft Event', as Ben Noys invaluabley understands it,<sup>3</sup> is unquestionably the centre of gravity of this revolutionary moment; its defining text, Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu', published in 1928 in *Weird Tales*. However, Lovecraft's is certainly not the only *haute* Weird. A good case can be made, for example, that William Hope Hodgson, though considerably less influential than Lovecraft, is as, or even more, remarkable a Weird visionary; and that 1928 can be considered the Weird tentacle's coming of age, Cthulhu ('monster [...] with an octopus-like head') a twenty-first birthday iteration of the giant 'devil-fish' – octopus – first born to our sight squatting malevolently on a wreck in Hodgson's *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*, in 1907.<sup>4</sup>

There are, of course, honoured precursors: French writers were early and acute sufferers from Montfort's Syndrome, an obsessive fascination with the cephalopodic.<sup>5</sup> In short order, the two key figures in the French pre-Weird tentacular, Jules Verne and Victor Hugo, produced works –

1. S.T. Joshi's periodisation of the golden age of Weird as 1880-1940 is persuasive (S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

2. I have argued this elsewhere: 'Introduction' to H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (NY: Random House, 2005); presentation at the 'Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Theory' event, London, Goldsmiths, 26 April 2007; 'Weird Fiction', in Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2008 [forthcoming]).

3. In his contribution to the 'Weird Realism' event in 2007 (see previous note).

4. William Hope Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland, and Other Novels* (London: Gollancz, 2002), 28-29.

5. Named by Reza Negarestani for Pierre Dénys de Montfort (1766-1820), pioneering and dissident French malacologist, author of, among others, the multi-volume *Histoire Naturelle Générale et Particulière des Mollusques* (6 volumes [1-4 only by de Montfort] Paris: F. Dufart, 1801-5), which took seriously the existence of the 'kraken octopus' and 'colossal octopus', and included still-iconic illustrations.

Verne in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) and Hugo in *The Toilers of the Sea* (1866) – which include extraordinary descriptions of monster cephalopods. These texts, while indispensable to the development of the Weird, remain in important respects *pre*-Weird not only temporally but thematically, representing contrasting *oppositions* to the still-unborn tradition, to varying degrees prefigurations of the Weird *and* attempts pre-emptively to de-Weird it.

Verne reveals his giant squid<sup>6</sup> at the end of a character's careful itemisation of its qualities, qualities which *he* can see, but which we for several paragraphs suppose him to be remembering from descriptions ('Did it not measure about six metres? [...] was its head not crowned with eight tentacles...? [...] were its eyes not extremely prominent [...] ?').<sup>7</sup> The animal thus appears pre-mediated by human understanding, at the end of a long section detailing the history of architeuthology, so that its monstrosity, though certainly not denied, is already defined by human categorisation. Frisson notwithstanding, the Weird, usually implacably Real in Lacanian terms, is preincorporated into the symbolic system.

When he sees it, the narrator Arronax relays the sight with a laborious itemised description interrupted by pedantic asides ('Its eight arms, or rather legs, were [...] implanted on its head, thus giving these animals the name

6. In fact the animal is, fittingly, slightly evasive of precise taxonomy: it is described as a '*poulpe*', usually translated 'octopus', and as '*calmar*', 'squid'. Though it seems to resemble the latter more than the former, with eight limbs it is lacking the squid's two longer hunting arms. It has also been translated into English as an 'immense cuttlefish', 'devil-fish', and indeed as a 'poult'.

7. All quotations from Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, translated by William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, revised 2001. Available at: <<http://home.netvigator.com/~wbutcher/books/20t.htm>>).

of cephalopods') and questionable exactitude that can only undermine the 'cosmic awe'<sup>8</sup> which typifies the Weird ('We could distinctly see the 250 suckers in the form of hemispherical capsules [...]'). Arronax carefully uses '*bras*' then '*pieds*' to describe the limbs, rather than his assistant's '*tentacles*': scientism rejects the tentacle. 'I did not want to waste the opportunity of closely studying such a specimen of cephalopod', Arronax tells us. 'I *overcame the horror* its appearance caused me, picked up a pencil, and began to draw it.'<sup>9</sup> Verne mounts a pre-emptive rearguard defence of a bourgeois 'scientific rationality', depicting it as stronger than this new bad-numinous.

Arronax describes his own description as 'too pallid', and says that only 'the author of *The Toilers of the Sea*' could do it justice. The reference is to the extraordinary passage in which Hugo's Gilliat is attacked by a '*piewvre*' (Guernésiais for octopus), the greatest and strangest of the pre-Weird reveries on the tentacular, and favourite for the title *tout court*. The chapter is a visionary rumination on the horror of octopus-ness. The creature is described in a vomit of aghast and contradictory metaphors and similes: 'a rag of cloth', 'a rolled-up umbrella', 'disease shaped into a monstrosity', 'a wheel', 'a sleeve containing a closed fist', 'birdlime imbued with hate', 'a pneumatic machine' – and on and on.<sup>10</sup>

Though Hugo is far less cited than Verne as an influence on the fantastic genre-cluster with which Lovecraft is also

8. What Lovecraft calls 'Cosmic alienage or "outsideness"' (H.P. Lovecraft, *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*, 1937. Among many other locations, see: <<http://www.geocities.com/soho/cafe/1131/14notesen.htm>>).

9. Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* [emphasis added].

10. Victor Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, translated by James Hogarth (New York: Random House, 2002), 350-352.

associated, his passage is much closer to *haute* Weird. Hugo counterposes the octopus to the chimera, to underline the former's afolkloric monstrousness. He repeatedly stresses the octopus's taxonomic transgression: it has no claws, but deploys vacuum as a weapon; it eats and shits with the same orifice (supposedly); it swims and walks and crawls; it is – as he stresses with ecstatic Kristevan disgust at the octopus-as-abject – flaccid, gangrene-like, and, 'horrifyingly [...] soft and yielding'.<sup>11</sup> The octopus is problematised ontology.

Hugo is nowhere more Weird than in his admirably clear insistence that octopuses, 'killjoys of the contemplator', demand a *rethinking of philosophy*.<sup>12</sup> There are, nonetheless, what one might archly call 'countervailing tendencies' pulling the passage away from *haute* Weird (it should go without saying that this is genealogy not criticism).

Though distinguished from the chimera, the octopus is identified with the Medusa, demon, and, repeatedly, with the vampire, reacquainting it, if unstably, with 'traditional' teratology. The octopus is obsessively depicted as evil – indeed, such a 'perfection of evil' that its existence is a vector of heresies of a double god, a cosmic parity of good and evil.<sup>13</sup> Although, in a more subterranean moment of French cephalopodia, Lautréamont deploys the octopoid to mock moralism, as when 'legions of winged squid'<sup>14</sup> [...] scud swiftly toward the cities of the humans, their mission to warn men to change their ways', a similar problematic is evident in *Malдорor* (1869). Lautréamont's

11. Ibid., 351.

12. Ibid., 354.

13. Ibid., 355.

14. '*poulpes*' – octopuses, properly.

God is confronted by Maldoror ‘changed into an octopus, clamp[ing] eight monstrous tentacles about his body’, the two now knowing they ‘cannot vanquish each other’.<sup>15</sup> This Manichean tentacular is in sharp contrast with the monstrosities of *haute* Weird, which are impossible to translate into such terms – predatory and cosmically amoral, but not ‘evil’. If they serve any morally heuristic purpose it is precisely to undermine any religious good/evil binary.

Counterintuitively, it is also precisely Hugo’s heady itemisation of the octopus’s dreadfulness that pulls against its Weirdness. Hugo decries the devilish as unthinkable with what is almost a sermon, that unfolds aghast, yes, but *without surprise*. Hugo’s octopus lurks like a bad conscience, a horror that we *already know* we are inadequate to thinking. By contrast, whether one deems it successful, risible, both, or something else, Lovecraft’s hysterical insistences that *nothing like this had ever been seen before*, that *nothing could possibly prepare anyone for such a sight*, when his Great Old Ones appear, is the narrative actualisation of the Weird-as-novum, unprecedented, Event.

In 1896, the other great early adopter of the tentacular, H.G. Wells, published the first and neglected *haute* Weird text (despite its author not generally being located in the sub-genre, perhaps because of the never-convincing Fabian camouflage draped over his bleak numinous). ‘The Sea Raiders’ tells of *Haploteuthis ferox*, a hitherto-unknown and aggressively predatory cephalopod which besieges the English coast, rising from deep waters to feed on boaters, and disappearing again.<sup>16</sup>

15. The Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror & The Complete Works*, translated by Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), 101, 103.

16. <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Sea\\_Raiders](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Sea_Raiders)>

There is no Vernian rejection of ‘tentacle’: the word and its derivations appearing twenty times in the short piece. There is no moralism – though horrifying, the monsters are predators, not devils. Above all, ‘this extraordinary raid from the deeper sea’ is unprecedented, unexpected, unexplained, unexplainable – it simply is. All that we who suffer this tentacular Event can hope is that they have returned ‘to the sunless depths of the middle seas, out of which they have so strangely and so mysteriously arisen.’

The three decades between the Verne/Hugo/Lautréamont moment and Wells’s saw the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, the so-called ‘Long Depression’ of 1873-1896, the rise of ‘new unionism’, and the ‘new imperialism’ and murderous ‘scramble for Africa’.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly visible, especially in the last, the crisis tendencies of capitalism would ultimately lead to World War I (to the representation of which traditional bogeys were quite inadequate). It is the growing proximity of this total crisis – kata-culmination of modernity, ultimate rebuke to nostrums of bourgeois progress – that is expressed in the shift to the morally opaque tentacular and proto-Lovecraftian radical Weird of ‘The Sea Raiders’.

Like Wells and unlike Lovecraft, William Hope Hodgson was barometric enough to the incipient apocalypse to en-monster it *before* it exploded into the war that killed him. In a stunning letter describing the front, he refers to what he considered his masterpiece, *The Night Land*: ‘My God, what a Desolation! [...] the Infernal Storm that seeps for ever, night and day, day and night, across that most

17. Simultaneous with the increase of its formlessness and historylessness, its efficacy as placeholder for the unrepresentable, the octopus’s somatic specificity – its spreading tentacles – also saw it increasingly deployed in satire as symbol for the ‘new imperialism’.

atrocious Plain of Destruction. My God! Talk about a lost World – talk about the END of the World; talk about the “NightLand” – it is all here, not more than two hundred odd miles from where you sit infinitely remote.’<sup>18</sup> The Weird is here explicitly, in John Clute’s magnificent formulation, ‘pre-aftermath fiction’.<sup>19</sup>

The Weird’s unprecedented forms, and its insistence on a chaotic, amoral, anthropoperipheral universe, stresses the implacable alterity of its aesthetic and concerns. The Weird is irreducible. A Weird tentacle does not ‘mean’ the Phallus;<sup>20</sup> inevitably we will mean with it, of course, but fundamentally *it* does not ‘mean’ at all (perhaps Weird Pulp Modernism is the most Blanchotian of literature).

## 1. DEATHMATCH

The Weird, then, is starkly opposed to the hauntological. Hauntology, a category positing, presuming, implying a ‘time out of joint’,<sup>21</sup> a present stained with traces of the ghostly, the dead-but-unquiet, estranges reality in an almost precisely opposite fashion to the Weird: with a radicalised uncanny – ‘something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it’<sup>22</sup> –

18. William Hope Hodgson, *The Wandering Soul* (Hornsea: Ps Publishing/Tartarus Press, 2005), 384.

19. Personal communication.

20. Which is why, despite the seeming isomorphism of interests and recent inevitable cross-fertilisation, haute Weird is radically opposed to the sub-genre of pornographic ‘hentai’ manga and anime known as ‘tentacle rape’.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994): et, subsequently, very many al.

22. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ (1919). <<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html>>.

rather than a hallucinatory/nihilist novum. The Great Old Ones (Outer Monstrosities, in Hodgson’s formulation)<sup>23</sup> neither haunt nor linger. The Weird is not the return of any repressed: though always described as ancient, and half-recalled by characters from spurious texts, this recruitment to invented cultural memory does not avail Weird monsters of Gothic’s strategy of revenance, but back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself.

Weird writers were explicit about their anti-Gothic sensibility: Blackwood’s camper in ‘The Willows’ experiences ‘no ordinary ghostly fear’; Lovecraft stresses that the ‘true weird tale’ is characterised by ‘unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces’ rather than by ‘bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule’.<sup>24</sup> The Weird entities have waited in their catacombs, sunken cities and outer circles of space since aeons before humanity. If they remain it is from a pre-ancestral time. In its very unprecedentedness, paradoxically, Cthulhu is less a ghost than the arche-fossil-as-predator. The Weird is if anything ab-, not un-, canny.

This must be insisted upon for the heuristic edges of the Weird and the hauntological – and indeed of other fantastic categories – to stay sharp. Hence the importance of ‘Geek Critique’, which rebukes, say, Terry Eagleton when he blithely discusses the ‘rash of books about vampires, werewolves, zombies and assorted mutants, as though a

23. William Hope Hodgson, ‘The Hog’ (1947) <<http://www.forgottenfutures.com/game/ff4/hog.htm>>.

24. Algernon Blackwood, ‘The Willows’ (1907). <<http://www.Gutenberg.org/files/11438/11438.txt>>; H.P. Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ (1927). <<http://www.yankeeclassic.com/miskatonic/library/stacks/literature/lovecraft/essays/supernat/supern00.htm>>.

whole culture had fallen in love with the undead’;<sup>25</sup> because whatever the merits of the rest of his argument, *only two of those figures are undead, and they are all different*. Teratological specificity demands attention. And, granting the controversial position that ghosts are teratological subjects, such specificities are nowhere more different and important than between Weird and hauntological.

Eagleton’s sort of cavalier hand-waving is increasingly rare, at least when it comes to the ghostly. Compare Eagleton with Sasha Handley, who points out that ‘to distinguish the particular meanings attached to ghosts’ demands taxonomy, and that her object of study is not ‘anonymous angelic or evil spirits’ but ‘spirit[s] appearing after death’.<sup>26</sup> Some years previously, however, two such perspicacious writers as Julia Briggs and Jack Sullivan as a matter of policy play fast and loose with categories of ghosthood. ‘I am [...] compromising’, Sullivan says. ‘All of these stories are appositional, in one sense or another, and “ghost story” is as good a term as any’.<sup>27</sup> According to Briggs, ‘the term “ghost story” [...] can denote not only stories about ghosts, but [...] spirits other than those of the dead [...] To distinguish these from one another according to the exact shape adopted by the spirit would be an unrewarding exercise’.<sup>28</sup> I have argued, rather,

25. Terry Eagleton, ‘Mark Neocleous: *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism*’, *Radical Philosophy*, 137, May/June 2006: 45–47, at 45.

26. Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 8.

27. Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), 9. While praising the book in her invaluable bibliography on the supernatural, Jessica Amanda Salmonson takes Sullivan to task for the ‘obscene impression that there were no women writers of ghost stories in England’. <<http://www.violetbooks.com/bib-research.html>>

28. Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber 1977), 12.

that the ‘exact shape’ is of enormous importance.

Briggs and Sullivan are wrong, but their error is not merely personal. While we may sympathise with S.T. Joshi in finding this use of the term ‘ghost story’ ‘irksome’, his deployment of a robust common sense against it – ‘To me “ghost story” can mean nothing but a story with a ghost in it’<sup>29</sup> – does not get at the nature of the problem. Key here is Briggs’s justification of her imprecision by claiming that the term ‘ghost story’ ‘is being employed with something of the latitude that characterizes its general usage’.<sup>30</sup> The imprecision is that of the culture, and it shifts.

A quarter-century before Briggs, ‘reasons of simplicity’ were sufficient for Penzoldt to ‘use the term “ghost story” also for tales of the supernatural that do not deal with a ghost’.<sup>31</sup> Mindful that there is nothing simple about such a decision, Briggs by contrast feels the need to justify her own position at some length: the looseness of usage is changing. A quarter-century after her, the new common sense has become that *ghostly* ghost stories are ‘a distinct literary form’,<sup>32</sup> and when Handley asserts her own position, precisely contrary to Briggs’s, almost as read but *not quite*, she takes a moment to argue it. Clearly the politics of ghostly specificity has shifted markedly, but has not banished all remnants of its countertendency – hauntology is haunted by a pre-hauntological taxonomic indeterminacy.

29. Joshi, *Weird Tale*, 2.

30. Briggs, *Night Visitors*, 12.

31. Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), 12 n.12.

32. Srdjan Smajic, ‘The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story’, *ELH*, 70:4, Winter 2003, 1107–1136, at 1131.

At this point in history, describing as a ‘ghost story’ a piece about werewolves or vampires, let alone about Shub-Niggurath or similar, would likely be considered false advertising. But it was not always so. In the early twentieth century, the terato-taxonomic membrane least breached today, that between the Weird and the Hauntological, was more likely to be permeated than that between ghosts and ‘traditional’ monsters. The self-styled ‘ghost stories’ of the 1920s might feature, say, giant flesh-sucking slugs (‘Negotium Perambulans’ and ‘And No Bird Sings’, by E.F. Benson).

As Handley points out, a ghost meant to the eighteenth-century English just what it does to us now: a revenant, not some eldritch oozing tentacled thing. At some point after 1800, however, that distinct ghost-ness of the ghost ebbed – temporarily, as it turned out – until by 1910 Hodgson’s *haute-Weird* adventurer Carnacki could without embarrassment be described as a ‘Ghost Finder’ in his battles with Hog-manifestations of ‘million-mile-long clouds of monstrosity’.

It is not so much irony as a constitutive contradiction that it was a few years before that, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, almost precisely in the middle of that trajectory of the de-ghosting ghost, that the key works of what is now vaunted as a *high* ghostly, an *echt* hauntologic, the ‘tradition’ of the English ghost story, appeared.

## 2. ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

The eighteenth-Century ghost was a revenant who tended to moralism and anti-Popish sniping, embodying as dread example lessons about virtue, justice, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

33. Handley, *Visions*, 16-19.

In the early nineteenth century, the explicitly sectarian character of that moralism had waned, but the instructional nature of hauntings remained.

Cultural production expressed anxiety over the sclerotic arrogance of the Victorian era and its victims, as well as the dominant culture’s ideological counterattack, the tendency to increased and cruder moralism. Non-mimetic art tends to express such frictions particularly vividly, and in the nineteenth century we can see the battle for the two souls of the ghost in the fictions of Dickens, versus those of the man he published,<sup>34</sup> Sheridan Le Fanu.

Dickens thinks nothing of jostling together, in ‘A Christmas Carol’, the ghost of a person, Jacob Marley, with those of various Christmases. To post-hauntological eyes this is a category-error, but Dickens is merely subordinating the specifics of the ghost to his extreme and mawkish extrapolation of the preceding epoch’s tendency to morally ‘mean’ with spectrality. In neither ‘The Haunted House’ (1859) nor ‘The Haunted Man’ (1848) are the haunts revenants of the dead, but ‘of my own innocence’, or a doppelgänger who performs a selective mnemectomy so the story can thumpingly moralise that it is important to remember wrong done to us ‘that we may forgive it’. Dickens’s ghosts are apotheoses of the instructional ghosts of the preceding century – out of time, rearguard in their sentimentality, themselves haunted by the future. They are not so much convincing, morally, as performatively flourished. These are not modern ghosts, but the last, already-dead walking dead of a dead epoch, bobbed about on sticks.

34. Le Fanu’s masterly ‘Green Tea’ appearing in *All the Year Round* in 1869.

Le Fanu's ghosts, by contrast, in their moral contingency, are intimations of disaster.<sup>35</sup> Even in his more seemingly traditional 'moral' stories, such as 'Mr Justice Harbottle' (1872), the nature of the spectral agents of revenge – their inhuman, de-subject-ed strangeness, and the repeated intimations that they, victims of injustice, are in hell ('pallid [...] secretly suffering [...] glittering eyes and teeth') makes sense according to no moral accounting. In the extraordinary 'Green Tea' (1869), the text's insinuations that Jennings's merciless torment at the hands of the abominable monkey spirit is in some way payback – that he is 'guilty', that he shows 'shame', though for what is unknown – read as morally obscene.

The blurring of the Weird with the ghostly is prefigured in the auditioning of animal spirits as avatars of the monstrous (before the Weird's demand to be considered cephalopod was clear), in the stark and amoral universe, in the protoplasmic formlessness of the dying vampire Carmilla (1872), in the autotelos of the monster (the monkey in 'Green Tea' just *is*). For these reasons it is tempting to agree with Sullivan that Le Fanu, rather than the more-usually-cited James, is the key revolutionary figure in the so-called 'traditional' ghost-story that we can now see was a – Weird-inflected – 'New Ghostly'.

However, while his fiction is if anything more vatic and perspicacious than James's (shades of Hodgson and Lovecraft), Le Fanu is a towering *interstitial* figure. The popular story of his death is so theoretically kitsch on this point that it could have been scripted by a cultural critic. Le Fanu was reputedly a martyr to a recurring nightmare

35. Sullivan is excellent on this point, and I draw on him here extensively. *Elegant Nightmares*, 32-68.

about being crushed to death by the collapse of an old grand mansion. When discovered dead, a horrified look on his face, his doctor was said to have intoned: 'I feared this. That house fell on him at last.' The story is tenacious, which, in the face of the fact that it is almost certainly untrue,<sup>36</sup> bespeaks its cultural resonance. Le Fanu's problematic is the crisis and coming fall of the house of Victoriana (and of the particular colonial upheavals of fading Protestant Ascendancy), and as such foundational to what followed; but the present of which it is a vivid expression is the fringe of a past, rather than the start of a future. His fiction is of end and failure.

The politics of sensory perception are important. Le Fanu, in his masterwork 'Green Tea', stresses the malevolent inhuman strangeness of the monkey, but also that it was *incorporeal*. This was, in ghost-story terms, not 'New Ghostly' but 'new traditionalism', uniting Le Fanu with Dickens and other pre-Weird, fabular-logic-wielding ghost-smiths. As Victorian ghosts grew more ostentatiously moralistic, they decorporealised. (In earlier centuries they had moralised *and* provided the thrills of physicality: they were often 'thought capable of moving material objects and of inflicting physical harm [...] [and] those who were confronted by ghosts believed that they could inflict material damage by shooting or stabbing the spirit'.)<sup>37</sup>

Central in marking him out as the key figure in this peculiar period, later to be designated the birth of a ghost-nation, Le Fanu's disciple M.R. James's ghosts could be touched, and touch.

36. Jim Rockhill, 'Introduction', in J Sheridan Le Fanu, *Mr Justice Harbottle and Others* (Ashcroft, BC: Ash-Tree Press, 2004). xii-xv.

37. Handley, *Visions*, 9.

## 3. THE OLD NEW WEIRD GHOSTLY

James is regularly cited as a – or *the* – founder of the ‘tradition’ of English ghost stories. It is commonplace to then wryly point out that James’s ghosts are in fact often not ghosts, but inhuman ‘demons’ of one sort or another.<sup>38</sup> Lovecraft stressed that James had ‘invent[ed] a new type of ghost’, not ‘pale and stately, and apprehended chiefly through the sense of sight’ but ‘lean, dwarfish, and hairy – a sluggish, hellish night-abomination midway betwixt beast and man – and usually *touched* before it is *seen*’.<sup>39</sup> In the rubble of the Lovecraft Event we can go further: the adversaries of James’s stories are disproportionately and emphatically *Weird*.

- Touch and touchability is central. James’s is the horror of the physical universe (a trauma that would trace into the obsessive materiality/ism of Lovecraft’s horror). It is the cloth-ness of the notorious face ‘of crumpled linen’ in ‘Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You My Lad’ that makes it so terrible. James even names one of his late stories ‘The Malice of Inanimate Objects’. The touchability of his ‘ghosts’ is not a return to that of their 18th-century cousins: this is a new (Weird) haptos, with little to do with human somaticism, and everything to do with the horror of matter. The most grotesque moment in ‘The Ash Tree’ is the ‘soft plump, like a kitten’, with which a just-glimpsed giant spider drops off the bed.

- James’s repeated insistence that he is an ‘antiquary’ is not convincing. He is acutely conscious of capitalist

38. See for example Rosemary Pardoe, ‘MR James and the Testament of Solomon’ (1999). <<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/ArchiveSolIntro.html>>

39. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*.

modernity, and a surprising number of his ‘ghosts’ manifest through it. The demon in ‘Casting the Runes’ bizarrely announces its intent by means of an advertisement in a railway carriage. The attack which the runes occasion is brought down quite amorally on whoever took them last, according to the depersonalised passings-on of bits of paper. The horror is of the universal equivalent in mass commodification: the runes are Bad Money. Most astonishingly, in ‘The Diary of Mr Poynter’, what is haunted is not a scrap of fabric nor the materials with which it is made but *the design upon it*: it is the *copied* design, reprinted with explicitly cutting-edge modern techniques, that is the locus for the apparition. This is the work of hauntology in the age of mechanical reproduction.

- James, like the *haute* Weird, is largely uninterested in plot, subordinating it to his invented strangeness. Unlike Lovecraft, who might simply dispense with it, to present Weirdness in pulp bricolage, ‘flushed out’, as he puts it, ‘from an accidental piecing together of separated things’,<sup>40</sup> James goes through the motions of plot; but i) his narrative arcs are utterly predictable, and ii) he knows this, and repeatedly uses formulations like ‘I surely do not need to tell you ...’ or ‘It will be redundant to conclude...’ or similar. This palpable impatience is underlined by his later increasingly epigrammatic and sparse stories. And like Borges, when he cannot be bothered even with half-hearted narrative, James simply describes his ideas freed of it, as in ‘Stories I Have Tried to Write’.

40. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’.

• Most important, of his non-ghost ‘ghosts’, a disproportionate number have appurtenances of the Weird, and read now as startlingly teratologically ahead of their time. His apparitions are hairy (‘The Diary of Mr Poynter’, ‘Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook’), chitinous (‘The Ash-Tree’), slimy and/or amphibious (‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’), totally bizarre (‘The Uncommon Prayer-Book’), and more than once, *tentacled* (‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, ‘Count Magnus’).

Today’s ghost stories are, overwhelmingly, exclusively hauntological, their figures revenant dead in time out of joint.<sup>41</sup> This tradition misremembers itself into existence. Many of its claimed foundation texts can only be so anointed in an act of heroic misrepresentation. Neurotically insistent on his own status as a ghost-story writer James may have been (the titles of his collections reiterate: *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories ...*, (1911), *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919), *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* (1925)); however, though he is often considered to have perfected or inaugurated such hauntological work, it is not, for the most interesting part, what defines James’s *oeuvre*.

41. Of the sixteen stories in the acclaimed recent collection of ‘new ghost stories’ *The Dark* (New York: Tor, 2003), various innovations of approach notwithstanding, there is only really one story (‘One Thing About the Night’, by Terry Dowling) in which the haunt is not a revenant function of the human (and it is not Weird, but the dark of the collection’s title). Even more telling is *All Hallows*, the journal of the Ghost Story Society, that contains, according to its own guidelines, work ‘in the style of the classic supernatural tale’, listing James as its first exemplar. Of the 23 stories in a recent bumper issue (*All Hallows* 43, Summer 2007), one contains a hint of the genuinely Weird (‘The Reflection’, by S.D. Tullis, haunted both by ghosts and by the ‘wrinkled tentacles’ (253) which may have trapped them in a mirror). For the others, two time-slips and one imp aside, to be a ghost story is, reasonably enough but *innovatively*, and in contradiction to James, definitionally to be a story of a ghost.

Nor, though, did he write Weird in any straightforward sense. James does not have the visionary abandon of later *haute* Weird. His use of more traditional ghosts and/or occasional folk-ish figures is repeated alongside Weird figures that in shortly forthcoming work would be repudiations of them. James’s corpus represents an under-one-roof *co-existence* – that would be all but unsustainable at any but that unique fulcrum moment – of what will later be seen to be hauntology and the Weird, the oppositional dyad.

In this context, the key James story is without question ‘Count Magnus’. Here, the ‘strange form’ from whose hood projects ‘the tentacle of a devil-fish’ – a Weird, inhuman, Cthulhoid figure who sucks faces from bones – is the *servant* of ‘a man in a long black cloak and broad hat’, a malevolent human ghost. This is an astounding crossover, its categorical transgression eclipsing any Marvel-DC or Cerebus-meets-Teenage-Mutant-Ninja-Turtle shenanigans. James creates the ultimate tag-team: *Hauntology deploys Weird as its sidekick*.

#### 4. JEAN PAINLEVÉ’S QUANTUM VAMPIRE

There is, in ‘Count Magnus’, and in James in general, no *aufhebung* of the Weird and hauntological. The two are, I suggest, in non-dialectical opposition, contrary iterations of a single problematic – hence in ‘Count Magnus’ the peculiarly literal and arithmetic *addition* of Weird to hauntological (with the latter privileged, precisely because James is, fundamentally, somewhat ghostlier than he is Weird).

Alongside the fantasist’s urge to literalise and concretise problematics, modern – particularly geek – culture is characterised by an accelerating circuit of teratogenesis, new monsters endlessly produced and consumed (exemplified in commodity form by the innumerable RPG and video-game

bestiaries; by the coquetry with which films hint at and protect their ‘monster shot’; by Pokémon, which deployed the cultural addiction as its slogan: ‘Gotta catch ‘em all!’). If the contradiction between Weird and hauntological was sublatale, then such drives would surely have led to the monstrous embodiment of any putative ‘resolved’ third term between Weird and haunt.

Nor is it difficult to imagine what such a synthesis would be. The outstanding synecdochic signifier for a revenant human dead is the skull – mind-seat now empty-eyed, memento mori, grinning, screaming.<sup>42</sup> The nonpareil iteration of the embodied Weird is the tentacle, and by suspiciously perfect chance, the most Weird-ly mutable – *formless* – of all tentacled animals is the octopus, the body of which, a bulbous, generally roundish shape distinguished by two prominent eyes, is vaguely homologous with a human skull.

The shapes are ready, and take little to combine: the Weird-hauntological monster is clearly a tentacled skull (see facing page for my own rendition).

Considering the fecundity and vigour of the teratological drive, the symbolic resonance of its constituents and their apparent topological compatibility for easy crossbreeding, the extreme rarity of the skulltopus in culture is mysterious. There are a very few examples, but the pickings are astoundingly meagre.<sup>43</sup> There is clearly something not right about



42. See for example *The Screaming Skull* directed by Alex Nichol (1958); F. Marion Crawford's 'The Screaming Skull' (in *Uncanny Tales*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911).

43. There is a five-second animation ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly2jNr1\\_nro](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly2jNr1_nro)); an illustration (<http://tachyonmkg.deviantart.com/art/skulltopus-11383138>); a hipster t-shirt ([http://www.HowlingGoodTshirts.com/marketplace/87072931/skulltopus\\_t-shirt](http://www.HowlingGoodTshirts.com/marketplace/87072931/skulltopus_t-shirt)); and, most impressively, Becky Cloonan's cover illustration for

it – the two components may imply one another but are *resistant to syncretism*, and the categorical unease this occasions denies the figure proliferation. The Weird and the hauntological generally relate to each other not by sublation, nor, *pace* James, by addition, but by either-one-or-the-otherness, in a manner suggestive of quantum superposition.



The author, with skull and octopus, yesterday.

Bataille's favourite anarcho-visionary marine biologist, Jean Painlevé, understood this. His 1945 'Le Vampire'<sup>44</sup> contains extraordinary footage of an octopus lasciviously crawling over a human skull very similar to it in shape and

her comic *East Coast Rising* Volume 2 (Los Angeles: Tokyopop, 2008 (forthcoming)), visible online at <<http://stabstabstab.deviantart.com/art/wrist-hurts-in-color-66012269>>.

44. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjNh0uZCCLc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjNh0uZCCLc)>

proportion. The octopus should, with that oozability of Weird skin, merge with the skull to become a skulltopus. That event is the asymptote of the interaction we see – but of course it does not happen, because it cannot.



Jean Painlevé, 'Le Vampire' (*Science is Fiction* BFIVD17190)

Instead, Painlevé shows us the unstable haptic flirtation of the two *without merger*. Those seconds are fleeting – the intervening years have distinguished the traditions of skull and octopus, and James's ingenious 'Count Magnus' solution would be hard to pull off now – but are the heart of the film (which otherwise pretends to be about vampire bats and ticks). They are the outstanding cultural example of the superposition of Weird and hauntological. We cannot sustain the skulltopus; as close as we can come is Painlevé's skull-and-octopus-interaction quantum vampire.

## COLLAPSE IV

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### 5. NEOLIBERALISM, THE SKULL AND THE OCTOPUS

Hauntology and Weird are two iterations of the same problematic – that of crisis-blasted modernity showing its contradictory face, utterly new *and* traced with remnants, chaotic and nihilist *and* stained with human rebukes. We can see these tendencies of the fantastic pulling at each other in the years since James, who inaugurates their contrary twinned birth, in waves of varying speeds depending on the ideological moment. At times one or other iteration might be dominant, but neither can ever efface the other. Opposed but not separable, the traces of the Weird are inevitably sensible in a hauntological work, and vice versa.

The degree to which one or the other has been stronger has affected the tendency towards their separation as genres of thought and pulp. Since the 1970s their ‘separateness’ has become dominant, not because there is a ‘drive to separate’, but as a corollary of the oscillating efficacy of as-simon-pure-as-possible Weird and/or hauntology, for thinking our fraught and oppositional history since the end of Keynesianism, that great Cthulhu-swat and ghostbuster.

In quick and dirty caricature, with the advent of the neoliberal *There Is No Alternative*, the universe was an ineluctable, inhuman, implacable, Weird, place. More recently, however, as Eagleton haunto-illiterately points out, the ghosts have come back, in numbers, with the spectral rebuke that there was an alternative, once, so could be again.

We do not get to choose, however – and why would we want to? If we live in a haunted world – and we do – we live in a Weird one.

The Corpse Bride:  
Thinking with *Nigredo*

Reza Negarestani



The living and the dead at his command,  
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,  
Till, chok'd with stench, in loath'd embraces tied,  
The ling'ring wretches pin'd away and died.<sup>1</sup>

The punishment imposed by Mezentius on the soldiers of Aneas should be inflicted, by coupling him to one of his own corpses and parading him through the streets until his carcass and its companion were amalgamated by putrefaction.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VIII 483-88.

2. Erinensis, 'On the Exploitation of Dead Bodies', *The Lancet*, 1828-9: 777.

## A PRELUDE TO PUTREFACTION

In the eighth book of Aeneid (483-88), Evander attributes an outlandishly atrocious form of punishment to Mezentius, the Etruscan King. However, it is not Virgil who first speaks of this punishment, for before Virgil, Cicero cites from Aristotle an analogy which compares the twofold composite of the body and soul with the torture inflicted by the Etruscan pirates. Revived during the reign of the Roman Emperor Marcus Macrinus, the notoriety of this atrocity survives antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth century, the horror of this torture is expressed, once again, by a popular emblem called *Nupta Contagioso* showing a woman being tied to a man plagued by syphilis, at the King's order. Widely distributed throughout Europe, the emblem continues to reappear in different contexts during the Renaissance and even toward the nineteenth century. *Nupta Contagioso* or *Nupta Cadavera* literally suggests a marriage with the diseased or the dead: a forcible conjugation with a corpse, and a consummation of marriage with the dead as a bride.

Haunted by the unusually philosophical insinuations of this punishment as well as its subtle imagery, to which human imagination cannot help contributing, Iamblichus and Augustine – like Aristotle – ruminate on the Etruscan torture. They both adopt it as something more than a fundamental allegory in their philosophies: they see in it a metaphysical model that exposes and explains the condition(s) of being alive in regard to body, soul and intellect.<sup>3</sup> Jacques Brunschwig, in his 1963 essay *Aristote*

3. For more details on Aristotle and the fragment on the psyche see A.P. Bos, *The Soul and its Instrumental Body: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle's Philosophy of Living Nature*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

*et les pirates tyrrhéniens*, describes the baroque details of the Etruscans' punishment. A living man or woman was tied to a rotting corpse, face to face, mouth to mouth, limb to limb, with an obsessive exactitude in which each part of the body corresponded with its matching putrefying counterpart. Shackled to their rotting double, the man or woman was left to decay. To avoid the starvation of the victim and to ensure the rotting bonds between the living and the dead were fully established, the Etruscan robbers continued to feed the victim appropriately. Only once the superficial difference between the corpse and the living body started to rot away through the agency of worms, which bridged the two bodies, establishing a differential continuity between them, did the Etruscans stop feeding the living. Once both the living and the dead had turned black through putrefaction, the Etruscans deemed it appropriate to unshackle the bodies, by now combined together, albeit on an infinitesimal, vermicular level. Although the blackening of the skin indicated the superficial indifferentiation of decay (the merging of bodies into a black slime), for the Etruscans – executioners gifted with metaphysical literacy and alchemical ingenuity – it signalled an ontological exposition of the decaying process which had already started from within. Also known as the blackening of decay or chemical necrosis, *nigredo* is an internal but outward process in which the vermicular differentiation of worms and other corpuscles makes itself known in the superficial register of decay as that which undifferentiates. For the Etruscan pirates, chemistry started from within but its existence was registered on the surface, so to speak; explicit or ontologically registered decay was merely a superficial symptom of an already founded decay, decay as a pre-established universal chemistry. The victim could only be unshackled from the

corpse and released when decay finished its ascension from within to the surface. Therefore the so-called climax of the punishment – the blackening of the body – coincides with the superficial conclusion of decay, the exposition of decay on an ontological level.

In a now lost piece, the young Aristotle makes a reference to the torture practiced by the Etruscan pirates.<sup>4</sup> In that text, Aristotle draws a comparison between the soul tethered to the body and the living chained to a dead corpse (*nekrous*):

Aristotle says, that we are punished much as those were who once upon a time, when they had fallen into the hands of Etruscan robbers, were slain with elaborate cruelty; their bodies, the living [*corpora viva*] with the dead, were bound so exactly as possible one against another: so our souls, tied together with our bodies as the living fixed upon the dead.<sup>5</sup>

Whether this fragment points to a Platonic phase in the philosophical life of Aristotle or not, it provides us with a unique resource for discovering the less explicit ties between his *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*. Accordingly, it also holds a key for understanding the severed ties between Aristotle's philosophy and that of Plato on the one hand and the enduring bonds between Aristotle and Scholasticism on the other. Yet more ambitiously, this fragment subtly points to a moment in philosophy when both the philosophy of Ideas and the science of being qua being are fundamentally built upon putrefaction and act in accordance with the chemistry of decay. It is the moment when beings must

4. Aristotle's fragment regarding the body-soul composite and the Etruscan torture is believed to be a part of *Eudemus* or *Protrepticus*.

5. Quoted by Cicero from Aristotle in *Hortensius*. Also see *Saint Augustine Against Julian* (*Writings of Saint Augustine, V. 16*), (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1957). Augustine uses the same quote from Cicero.

undergo necrosis and decay in order to remain in being and the Ideas must be founded on an intensive necrosis and an extensive decay in order to remain in their essence and to synthesize with other Ideas. In other words, this moment marks a necessity for Ideas – even the Idea of ontology itself: in order to be active intensively and extensively, inwardly and outwardly, the Idea must first be fully necrotized and blackened on all levels, intensively and extensively.

The following is a disorganized venture – more in line with grave robbers and necrophiles than with archaeologists and scholars of history – to disinter the twist inherent to the fragment associated with Aristotle and to delve into the moment when, prior to all arrangements and establishments, a pact with putrefaction must be made; the moment of *nucleation with nigredo*, as we must call it.



## NECROPHILIC REASON

Aristotle's fragment regarding the Etruscan torture bears a deeply pessimistic irony; it is not the supposedly living body which is tethered to a corpse to rot, because it is exactly the soul qua living which is bound to a corpse – namely, the body. For Aristotle, the soul, as the essence of a being, needs a body to perform its special activities, and it is the responsibility of the soul to be the act of the intellect upon the body. Therefore this necrocratic confinement is both the price and a means of having a body as instrument, and then using this instrument to govern and eventually unite beings. The soul, in this sense, has two activities, inward and outward. The outward activity of the soul is the actualization of the body according to the active intellect (*nous*) which is immortal; in other words the extensive activity of the soul is the animation of the body according to the *ratio* (reason) derived from the *nous*, the intensive and inward activity of the soul. The inward activity of the soul is its unitive activity according to the intellect as the higher genus of being qua being. The intensive activity of the soul is the act of bringing the universe into unison with the intellect according to *ratio*; for this reason, the intensive activity of the soul coincides with the enduring of the soul in its relation to the intellect, which itself is internal to the soul. Here, the intensive and extensive, inward and outward activities of the soul must be in accordance with one another in order for the world to be intelligible and, in its intelligibility, to move toward intellect in proportion to reason.

If the intelligibility of the world must thus imply a 'face to face' coupling of the soul with the body qua dead, then intelligibility is the epiphenomenon of a necrophilic

intimacy, a problematic collusion with the rotting double which brings about the possibility of intelligibility within an inert cosmos. The intelligibility allotted to the body as *corpora cadavera* by ratios of the intellect (or reasons) – each inherent to a different type or gradation of the soul – animates the world according to the intellect. Yet in doing so, reason reanimates the dead rather than bestowing life upon it; for in terms of the Aristotelian body qua cadaver, intelligibility is the reanimation of the dead according to an external agency. Reason grounds the universe not only on a necrophilic intimacy but also in conformity with an undead machine imbued with the chemistry of putrefaction and *nigredo*.

Both in Etruscan torture and in Aristotle's fragment, the living or the soul is tied to the dead or the body *face to face*. The Greco-Roman motif of the mirror is obviously at play here; one sees itself as the other, the perfect matching double. However, the great chain of philosophers from Aristotle to Augustine and beyond only tell us about one side of the mirror, shamelessly underestimating the understanding of both the living and the dead. They tell us that the soul sees itself as the dead party whilst chained to the body. But this is surely a ridiculous attempt to unilateralise the mirror motif, for not only does the living see itself as dead, but the dead also looks into the eyes of the living, and its entire body shivers with worms and dread. It is indeed ghastly for the living to see itself as dead; but it is true horror for the dead to be forced to look at the supposedly living, and to see itself as the living dead, the dead animated by the spurious living. Neither Aristotle nor Augustine tell us about this infliction upon the dead of the burden of the living, this molesting of the dead with the animism of the

living. It is the Barbarians who formulated and exposed the ulterior cruelty of the Etruscan torture in retaliation for the Romans' atrocities: they slaughtered their own cattle, disembowelled them and then forced the Romans inside the carcasses in such a way that only the talking heads of the soldiers protruded. In doing so, they exhibited the farce of vitalism by ventriloquising the dead with the living.

The binding of the soul to the body as a tying of the living to the dead is later arithmetically captured by Aristotle in the formulation of a metaphysical model which is best understood arithmetically, or at least geometrically, as scholastic philosophers preferred. In vitalizing matter and actualizing it, the soul needs a body as an apparatus by which the universe of beings can be led toward the intellect which causes the noumenal universe to exist. In order both to use and to be used by the body under the direction of the intellect, the soul must first remain in itself. And conversely, in remaining in itself, the soul must animate the body and bring about the synthesis and unification of bodies. In other words, in simultaneously governing beings and conducting them toward being qua being (higher genera of being), the soul must first remain in itself and extend beyond itself. For Aristotle, this metaphysical model, the model of intelligible ontology, is arithmetically distilled as *aphairesis* (*apo*+*airein*, abstraction), a taking away or subtraction. As an Aristotelian mathematical procedure, *aphairesis* consists in two vectors of operation, of negative and positive directions in regard to each other, in diametric opposition but synergistically continuous and reinforcing. For *aphairesis*, as taking away or subtraction, emphasises simultaneously removal (that which is taken away) and conservation (that which is left behind by removal) – the removed and the remainder. A soul coupled with the body mixes with the impure –

since the body debases its essence – and at the same time approaches being qua being by remaining in itself (i.e. by ascending in its purity). For Aristotle, only subtraction can make such double-headed and simultaneous mobilization possible. *Aphairesis* or subtraction, accordingly, maps the vectors of the *mobilization* and *effectuation* of reason. *Aphairesis* is thus a procedure whereby the soul can be captured simultaneously in the sense of its belongings (or bodies) and in its movement toward *nous* which sheds those belongings as it approaches the intellect – an arithmetic formulation of the Etruscan metaphysical cruelty.<sup>6</sup>

The Aristotelian procedure of *aphairesis*, or subtraction, as a formulation for the metaphysical model of intelligible ontology, resurfaces explicitly during the Middle Ages – especially during the period known as High Scholasticism (1250–1350) – creeping beneath metaphysical systems, alchemical models and theological creeds. However, before affecting scholasticism, Aristotle's model implicitly exerts its forbidden influence on Neo-Platonism, especially through apophatic or negative theologians for whom the ineffability of God must be exposed by *aphairesis* or abstraction. Plotinus states that the reality of the One (*hen*) cannot be explained through the epistemological registers or attributes (belongings) which it shares with humans. Therefore, the Divine must be stripped of all its belongings by *aphairesis*,

6. *Aphairesis*, as a subtractive correlation between the soul and the body, simultaneously offers the soul the capacity of having a body as an instrument or belonging, and the opportunity of preserving its ultimate correlation with intellect. Arithmetically, in *aphairesis* or subtraction, the amount that is negated or taken away marks the dying correlation of a magnitude with its belongings (as the correlation of the soul with the mortal body). The amount that remains after subtraction, however, represents the correlation between the remainder and that which continues to remain regardless of the magnitude of subtraction. This can be expressed as the undying correlation between the soul and the intellect.

a procedure which takes away all that exists extraneously and negatively contributes to all that remains and itself progressively diminishes (becoming sublime). Here, the conceptual abstraction of *aphairesis* returns to Aristotle's subtractive model, seeded within his fragment on the Etruscan torture: the coupling of the soul with the body qua belonging is necessary in order to shed belonging and lead toward being qua being. This is so given that being qua being is a genus of being which persists and remains under any condition or environment synthesized by other beings whatsoever. In other words, being qua being is that which continues to remain after all belongings are shed, removed and taken away. This is what makes *aphairesis* the fundamental procedure in revealing or exposing the One, as employed for the most part by neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and Proclus.

Both Aristotle's and Plotinus' formulations of *aphairesis* are grounded on one precondition, which can be summarized in terms of *conservation after subtraction*: despite being chained to the festering corpse or being subtracted, the soul is able to conserve some of itself and render the body intelligible. In the same vein, no matter what is taken away from the Divine, it will continue to remain as the One already there. Correspondingly, if magnitude Y is subtracted from magnitude X the result can be either zero, or  $x$  (where  $x$  is a remainder from X). Both Aristotle, in regard to the soul vis-à-vis the intellect (as part of the soul which remains under any condition), and Plotinus, in regard to the One, take conservation of a remainder for granted. The world cannot be intelligible and move toward intellect without the assumption that the subtraction or mortification of the soul by the body does not lead to the total erasure of the soul in

the first place. Aristotle's system of metaphysics is thus built upon an assumption which has been taken for granted: that for every subtraction, there is a possibility of conservation in the form of a remainder, and for every remainder, the possibility of persistence in remaining, i.e. a resistance toward further subtraction through remaining in itself.

The coupling of the soul with the body could indeed lead to the instant mortification of the soul, thus eliminating the possibility of the soul's conferring intelligibility on the universe. But this is not the case, for the soul remains in itself and brings about the possibility of intelligibility. For this reason, the possibility of intelligibility is based on the possibility having a conserved part or remainder after subtraction – that is, the continued possibility of the soul after coupling with the dead and being putrefied by its rotting double. Only when this possibility is taken as a determinable and certain possibility can reason be associated with the intelligibility that issues forth from *nous*. The persistence of the soul in conserving its essence, or the determination of the One in remaining, certainly wards off the threat of becoming the dead qua the body or belonging; but only at the cost of becoming intimate or problematically hooked up with the dead. We shall now see how the insistence in *remaining so* or *conservation* in regard to subtraction pushes the soul to a more rotten depth of *nigredo*, and how reason exhumes a more problematic intimacy with the *nekrous*.

### HORROR IN THE NEGATIVE

Subtraction is an economical mobilization of non-belonging in two directions: (1) the shedding of belongings or extension by means of *expendable* belongings; (2) remaining or intensive resistance against the

expendability of belongings. The subtractive procedure of *aphairesis* bifurcates into two directionally opposite but synergistic vectors – the extensive and intensive vectors of subtraction. The outward and extensive vector of subtraction is the one by which belongings are taken away or by which the soul can extend beyond itself via a body. The latter, however, is the vector of remaining so and as such. As the inward vector of subtraction, remaining – or, more accurately, the persistence of the remainder – characterizes an intensive vector of subtraction whereby that which continues to remain brings about the possibility of being qua being or the Ideal. It is the persistence of the soul in remaining after its katabatic contact with the body that opens up the opportunity of its coming into unison with the intellect. Similarly, only that which continues to remain despite being stripped of its belongings or attributes can eventuate the One (*hen*) and the Idea of being qua being; for once again, being qua being is ‘being in *remaining* so and as such’. To this extent, not only must the soul remain after its necromantic contact with the body, but also at least a part of it must continue to remain. In other words, Aristotle’s model of conservation (*viz.*, having a conserved part after subtraction) might be based on the determinability of having a remainder in the first place, but it mainly concerns the continuation of the remainder.

Having a remainder after subtraction is not sufficient for the march toward the intellect, or for the exposition (explanation) of the Idea of being qua being. The remainder must *continue* to remain – this is the insinuation of the metaphysical model of conservation. The possibility of the remainder is necessary but not sufficient, for its sufficiency lies in the possibility of the remainder in remaining.

The remainder as an exposed and determinable quantity must be hosted by the indeterminable vector continued remaining, namely, *to remain*. The remainder alone as a determinable quantity is exposed by what is subtracted, but *to remain*, or in other words, to persist in remaining, coincides with the continuation of subtraction – a greater and greater subtraction. In short, the more the remaining persists, the more it is subtracted, the less the remainder gets. Persistence in remaining means to shrink more, because the act of remaining coexists with the progression of subtraction. To remain is at the same time a persistence in subtraction (hence mobilization of the vector that takes away belongings) and the continuation of the remainder in remaining less. *R* as the remainder reveals something *already there*, but persistence or continuation in remaining suggests insistence on what is *always* already there and can only be perpetuated through *rs* smaller than *R*. A system of cosmogenesis whose Ideals and infinities have been established prior to its building processes – as *the ones already there* – has a certain destiny with regard to the horror genre: Its horror stories are inherently concerned with decay even if they deal with other themes and dabble in other affairs.

To provide further clarification as to how the continuation of the remaining or remaining in itself is only possible in remaining less – subtractive extension and diminutive intention – the procedure of *aphairesis* can be mathematically (albeit schematically) demonstrated. Take two geometrical magnitudes *A* and *B*, where  $A > B$  as the Ideal ground of the procedure and a guarantee for its continuation (iterative subtraction). The procedure starts by subtracting the greatest multiple of the smaller magnitude *B* (henceforth *mB*) from the greater multiples of the greater magnitude *A*:  $A - mB = R$ . The result of the subtraction as

hitherto a conserved part is the remainder  $R$  which is less than the smaller magnitude  $B$  ( $R < B$ ). Since the remainder  $R$  is less than the smaller magnitude  $B$ , the procedure is continued by subtracting the greatest multiple of the remainder  $R$  (henceforth  $nR$ ) from the smaller magnitude  $B$ :  $B - nR = r'$ . The result of the subtraction is again a remainder but it is less than the previous remainder ( $r' < R$ ). The procedure of subtraction (*aphairesis*) will continue in this way to reveal that which remains as the one already there. For this reason, the persistence in remaining or the act of remaining (to remain) – as the continual result of the subtractive operation – can only invest itself in *remaining less* and as ontological decay. The continuity of remaining and thus the revelation of the One (already there) and being qua being (being in remaining so and as such) is only attainable, and must be conducted, through diminution and decay:  $R > r' > r'' > \dots$

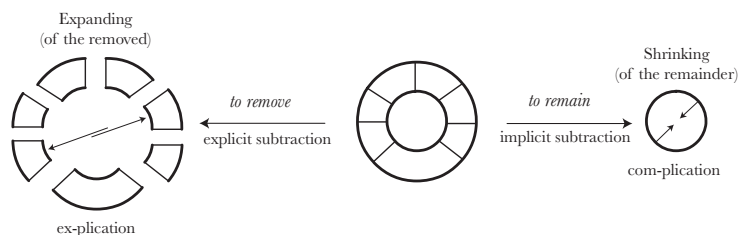


Fig. 1. Extensive and intensive vectors of subtraction

The tenacity of the soul – as an act of the intellect upon the body – in conserving its inner parts brings life to the universe as an intelligible principle. Yet this insistence on survival or remaining introduces decay and *nigredo* into both intelligibility and vitality. The persistence of the

remainder in remaining (*viz.*, to remain) is submission to the *de facto* reign of putrefaction, the universal of intelligibility and the particular of a problematical openness to the dead. For the body which is nourished by the soul, the mandatory submission of the soul to decay (*diminutio* or lessening) is in fact the mimesis of the dead by the soul. By mimicking the dead, the soul can repose intimately with the dead until it is reclaimed through reason by the intellect. But the exposition of the intellect is too contingent upon its correlation with the soul through reason which is itself aligned with decay or the intensive diminution undertaken by the soul. Accordingly, *to remain* as such is equal to intensive diminution coupled and differentially connected to extensive decay<sup>7</sup> – the shriveling soul whose continuity extends to the necrotized body through the worms which twist in and out of it:

For as the Etruscans are said often to torture captives by chaining dead bodies [*nekrous*] face to face with the living, fitting part to part, so the soul seems to be *extended throughout and affixed* to all the sensitive members of the body.<sup>8</sup>

Mapping the vector of intensive decay or diminution, the act of remaining bridges the gap between the subtractive extension and the interiorization of no-thing

7. In medieval literature and painting, the intensive and extensive vectors of decay are imagined as a shriveling body from which a cosmic range of other beings emerge. While the shriveling body which folds back upon itself visually narrates the intensive aspect of decay; worms, corpuscles and other nameless beings which come forth from the contracting body stand for the extensive vector of decay. As the inheritor of the alchemical tradition, Giordano Bruno sees the intensive decay of the shriveling body in the *caput mortuum* (death's head) or the residuum of a substance after its attributes have been extracted by distillation; while the extensive vector of decay is seen by Leibniz as worms which contain smaller worms, *ad infinitum*.

8. Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 8, (Leipzig, 1893), 47. 21-48.

or no remainder. If the soul must conserve the inner parts of itself (corresponding to the higher genera of being qua being) after coupling with the body, then it must remain itself at the same time as extending beyond itself. However, as argued above, remaining (as of the soul) is not possible except through remaining less, that is to say as intensive diminution of the remaining. Yet what is the guarantor of remaining *per se*, or to be exact, what guarantees that the remaining shrinks and becomes less? Keeping in mind that remaining in itself is *remaining less*, intensive diminution is reinforced by extensive subtraction. The answer is that only through the interiorization of nothing qua non-belonging, can remaining continue to remain, or to be precise, continue to *remain less*. Without *nothing* being interiorized diachronically within the remaining, the remaining cannot continue to become less and thus persist. This nothing qua non-belonging cannot be simply equal to the exhaustion of the remaining; nor can it be equated with the Idea of being qua being (*viz.*, the One) which sheds belongings. In other words, *nothing* as the guarantee of ‘continuation in remaining’ is neither the content of the exhaustion, nor can it be taken as correlated with the remaining. Interestingly, the reasons for this resistance toward correlation with what remains and what is removed lies in the premises of the act of remaining – persistence in remaining assumes two basic Ideas: diminution or shrinkage, and continuity in diminution. Not only must that which remains/survives become less, it must also maintain continuity in lessening. For this reason, the guarantor of remaining must simultaneously be the impetus of the intensive diminution and induce a continuity in remaining (in remaining less) from outside. The guarantor must be autonomous and separate from that which remains, because if correlated

with that which remains, it will be indexed by exhaustion. Yet the guarantor cannot be the subject of exhaustion for if it were then it could not maintain and guarantee the lessening of the remaining, that is to say, the continuity of remaining. What is itself consumed cannot sufficiently guarantee the exhaustion of that which correlatively succeeds it.

In short, if the guarantor of remaining is correlated with the act of remaining, it will be indexed by exhaustion and thus cease to influence. Any disruption in the influence of this guarantor induces a discontinuity in the persistence in diminution, which in fact is the continuation of remaining. Moreover, the guarantor of remaining should not be sought in the extensive vector of subtraction by which belongings are taken away, because the subtracted magnitude cannot influence the fate of remaining magnitude. Therefore, not only must this guarantor evade correlation with that which remains (something), but it must also inspire the act of remaining, or in intensive terms, remaining less or diminution. Exterior to the Idea of ontology (namely remaining), the guarantor of remaining as such is *nothing* – the impossibility of being correlated either with what is removed or with what remains. To this extent, this impossibility of correlation and belongings entails both diachronicity and exteriority. The guarantor of remaining – no-thing – must be diachronic and external to the remaining, otherwise the remaining cannot maintain its continuity, whose ontological constitution is anchored by remaining less. By approximating no-thing as radical exteriority, the remaining can continue to remain and shed its belongings, that is to say, it can remain less or remain in itself. Remaining in itself is the medium of being qua being and hence the medium by which union with the intellect and

the exposition (revelation) of the One is possible. But this medium only takes on its structure in so far as the remaining approximates or limitropically approaches no-thing or the impossibility of belonging in order to maintain an intensive diminution necessary for remaining less or remaining in itself. Intensive diminution is in itself synchronous only by virtue of its disjunction with a diachronic exteriority which ontologically underpins the continuity of the remaining in remaining less.

In order to remain in any instance, first of all nothing, as impossibility of belonging, must be prioritized and postulated in its exteriority. The reason for this prioritization of nothing as a non-correlatable exteriority is to satisfy the prerequisite ontological status required for effectuation of the remainder in any instance. This prerequisite status is the intensive diminution or remaining less, for the diminution of the remaining is nothing but remaining as such. In subtraction, diminution or intensive decay is at the same time a solution to the problem of remaining and the very ontological constitution of the remaining *per se*. However, this solution simply cannot work, or in other words, is not able to be correlated with its problem, unless *nothing* as radical exteriority is taken as a necessity. In order to shed belongings and remain less, the uncorrelatable primacy of non-belonging must be affirmed. In other words, *nothing* must be prioritized prior to all arrangements and establishments of the remainder.

Accordingly, something that remains, or *something* in general – as that which remains – always testifies to the binding or interiorization of nothing as priority and primacy. In the persistence of its remaining, the remainder must shed its belongings (or remain less) by affirming the primacy of

nothing, for only nothing, as the impossibility of belonging, can guarantee the continuing shedding of belongings. This relation between solution and problem, secured by means of the prioritization of nothing, can be explained in Aristotelian terms as well: Chained to the body, the soul cannot bring the universe into unison with the intellect or bring about the possibility of progression toward *nous* (the problem) unless it continues to *remain* according to an inner part of itself, conserving the innermost depths of its essence (the solution). Here the solution, which pertains to remaining, cannot be correlated with the problem without submitting to the priority of nothing or – in terms of the soul – the void. The soul must submit to the priority and primacy of nothing or the void in order to solve its problem in regard to the intellect.

In short, intensive diminution or remaining less is the solution to the problem of remaining, but this solution itself must bind the priority and primacy of nothing to the fullest extent. In this sense, nothing as exteriority is interiorized to provide that which remains with the ontological constitution requisite in remaining as such – but only as a problematic bond with nothing, which, as the impossibility of belonging, cannot be relieved through being captured by correlation. If nothing qua non-belonging is uncorrelatable, then it is the embracing of *nothing* by the soul or the living that becomes the manifest problematic. In order to survive or enlighten with life, the soul must either sleep with the dead, or accede to the priority and primacy of the void as its internal guide. What could be worse for vitalism than at once being animated through a necrophilic alliance, and simultaneously, protected under the aegis of the void? It is decay that provides the bridge between the latter

(the problematic embracing of nothing) and the former (the subtractive bond with the body or belonging). That which arises from death can only peacefully repose among the dead, as living.

The interiorization of nothing through which the remainder continues to remain and is subjected to ontological shrinkage by remaining in itself, deploys a subtractive vector which is implicit in remaining. This internalized or implicit subtractive vector corresponds with the persistence of the remainder, or more precisely, it coincides with the survival of the remainder in its resistance to the explicit subtractive vector through which belongings are exteriorized. The medium of survival and its constitution are thus, problematically, the implicit apparatus of death. It is in this sense that the persistence of that which remains – the innermost depth of the soul, the intellect or the One – is ultimately indeterminable; for it is not only determined by the exteriorization of belongings but also by that *nothing* to which it must implicitly submit in order to remain (less). Once the intellect, as the highest genus of being qua being, is deprived of its determinability, reason, in its mission to redeem the world on behalf of the intellect, reclaims the world for a problematic death qua life instead.

As for Plotinus' metaphysics, the horror of abstraction (*aphairesis*) is akin to the horror implicit in the Idea of ontology or remaining as such: the apogee of the One is undermined by another culmination which emphatically precedes it, yet cannot be chronically culminated. The search for the Ideal turns out to be a *sub rosa* search for the problematic on behalf of nothing, conducted all along through the bottom-up chemistry and differential dynamics of decay and putrefaction. As we shall see, the guarantor of any Idea of persistence, regardless of its Ideal or telos, is

*nothing*. Remaining might be a solution in regard to finding a medium through which the Ideal can be explained, but such a solution brings with it the problems inherent to the clandestine alliance with nothing. Persistence under any subtractive condition is definitely a fitting solution for the revelation of the One and the effectuation of being qua being, but this solution was already infested with problems which do not belong here. Our survival or continuation in remaining is indeed a vitalistic solution, but it is not an authentic or genuine one, for it inherently transmits an entirely alien set of problems to which it can neither correlate nor belong. Survival, in this sense, is the remobilization of problems whose nature is radically detrimental to our solutions.

In contrast to the exteriorization of belongings, the exteriority of nothing in its primacy is internalized in order that the remainder might remain and survive. Remaining is a trajectory whose *continuity* is described by the removal of its attributes and belongings, but whose *continuation* is guaranteed only by its diminution and decay. To stave off the realism of the dead which follows from its coupling with the body, the soul disguises its putrefaction as survival; that is to say, reformulates the problem of decay according to new correlations with its own Ideals and reasons. However, in distracting the dead, the soul is exposed to problems whose concerns belong neither to the living nor to the dead. *Katabasis*,<sup>9</sup> or the descent of the soul, is not radical enough, for it conveys the profit-seeking openness of the soul to the body as an instrument, an *economical* openness

9. In Greco-Roman ritualistic tradition, *katabasis* refers to a journey which is characterized by descent (usually to the underworld). *Katabasis* is a depthwise and pro-ground (*profundus*) movement; for that reason, in scholastic alchemy, it is often associated with *nigredo* or depthwise and intensive decay.

based on mutual affordability. Yet it is exactly this conservationist affordance of the soul-body composite that causes the soul to be cracked open by nothing from within. The first descent of the soul is only a twist that opens the soul on to an ultimate *katabasis* where the soul is directly – albeit problematically – fettered to nothing, kept alive to rot away in and for itself. It is here that Aristotle's analogy of the relation between body and the soul with the tribulation imposed by the Etruscan pirates proves to be, if not wrong, then problematic; for it sincerely suggests the necrotization of the soul by the body only to divert attention from a second necrosis, blacker than the first.

The soul is necrotized in its mission to govern the universe and vitalize matter according to the intellect. In full conformity with its vitalistic intention, the soul assumes an intimacy with nothing: it is invaded by *nothing* from behind (*a tergo*). The second necrosis of the soul – shrouded in the explicit cruelty of the first – is its unbreakable and wilful bond contracted with nothing in order to remain, a tie fully based on reason. It is only in the second necrosis that the climax of the Etruscan torture finds its proper narrative. The fastening of the living to the dead is a culmination from the perspective of a collective gathering, but surely of minor interest when we know that the living, the soul, is itself rotting. The real climax of the Etruscan torture, for this reason, is the *feeding* of the living while strapped to the dead. It is only this second necrosis that fully suggests the culmination of the Etruscan torture: while tethered to nothing, the soul qua remainder continues to live, as its continuation in remaining (less) is guaranteed by the primacy and priority of nothing. Bound to nothing, the remainder effectuates the act of remaining in the form

of diminution and decay whilst fastened to nothing as a constitutional primacy. The two necroses of the soul, to this extent, can be categorized, as regards of their extensive and intensive development (*-plication*) in metaphysical cruelty and nigrescent *katabasis*, as *explicit* and *implicit* necroses of the soul. The former – the explicit necrosis of the soul – is the coupling with the body qua *cadavera* in order for the soul to extend beyond itself by means of subtracted or necrotized belonging (the body). The latter – the implicit necrosis of the soul – is entailed by the internalization of nothing in its primacy in order to shed belongings and remain in itself. The two necroses of the soul upon which the universe and intellect are fixed bring about the possibility of ontology as a great chain of corpses whose arrangement is determined by their explicit and implicit indulgence in necrophilia. Aristotle fully exposes the first necrosis only to exploit its explicit drama to conceal the second.

#### THE IDEA AND THE WORMS

The subtractive correlation between vitalism and matter, we argued, is accomplished by means of explicit necrosis, or the soul-body composite according to Aristotle's system. Yet the explicit necrosis is linked to an implicit necrosis whose necessity is fully supported and affirmed by reason. For the sake of clarity, we shall delineate the nature of the second necrosis before moving forward: The subtractive correlation between matter and vitalism is intensively conducted through a medium which constitutes the very Idea of ontology – that is, of remaining so and as such. Yet remaining as remaining less – diminution or intensive decay – requires a guarantee whereby it can be perpetuated or at least made possible in both its lessening and its continuity.

While this guarantor cannot be included by the extensive and intensive vectors of subtraction, it can be problematically posited in such a way that the remaining can maintain its diminution and continuity by approaching it as a limit process. This guarantor is the impossibility of belonging or the disjunctive nothing which, once presupposed by the remainder, can impose the continuous shedding of belongings. Recall that the shedding of belongings is registered extensively as the subtractive extension or exteriorization of belongings, and intensively as remaining, or more accurately, remaining less. In a similar vein, Plotinus' procedure of *aphairesis* or abstraction exposes the One through remaining as an ontological medium, but in doing so it exerts the imposition of nothing or no-one. It is in this sense that for both Aristotle and Plotinus, the medium of revelation for the Ideal (that which continues to remain under any subtractive magnitude) is diminution and intensive decay. Yet this is not the only twist inherent to the problem of exposing or explaining the Ideal. The second – implicit – necrosis brings a far more convoluted twist to the assumed correlations between the Ideal, the problem and the solution.

We argued that both the intellect and the One as the Ideal posit problems in regard to their ontological status (being qua being) as related to the universe or beings. Speaking somewhat reductively, part of the problem posited by the intellect regards channelling the progression of the universe into unison according to reason. Likewise, the problem posed by the One is the exposition of the One as the Ideal of being qua being – that is to say, the exposition of the One as that which is indifferent to, or even resists, the subtractive mobilization of belongings. The solution

lies in the establishment of an ontological medium which not only reinforces subtraction but also remains in itself and according to the Ideal. In other words, to settle the problem of exposing Ideals, the solution must abide by the ontological status of 'the Ideal as that which withstands any subtractive magnitude'. For this reason, the solution must be correlated both to subtraction and to the ontological medium of the Ideal. Although correlated to subtraction from one side, the ontological intension of the solution must only correspond to that of the Ideal. Otherwise it undoes the problem by dispossessing it of its assumed ground.

Now, if the ontological intention of the Ideal is indifferent to subtraction, then in order to explain the Ideal, the solution must expose the continuity of the Ideal in remaining, or more accurately, the intractability of the Ideal in regard to subtraction. Accordingly, then, remaining in itself – or in other words, *remaining as such* – constitutes the solution. However, as argued, in order to expose the Ideal, *remaining as such* must correspond to the act of remaining less, which is impossible without the intervention of nothing. Therefore, the solution (*viz.*, remaining as an ontological medium) radically betrays the Ideal because, firstly, it submits to the priority and the primacy of nothing; and secondly, it internalizes the disjunctive exteriority of nothing in order to realize and authenticate itself. To this extent, if the Ideal is to be explained (the problem), the solution must essentially be posed on behalf of *nothing* because only through remaining less, or more exactly, decay (the solution), can the Ideal, the problem and the solution encompass each other as Idea. As the medium cementing the Idea in its most concrete – albeit volatile – form, decay or remaining (less) entails *nothing* on both planes of exteriority and interiority because through

the intervention of nothing, the true Idea of remaining can be underpinned in its continuity, diminution and being. The Idea of something as that which remains or survives subtraction even transiently points to the essentially duplicitous nature of this intervention. The intervention or imposition of nothing in its priority and primacy ensures the act of remaining and persistence of something, but at the same time this vitalistic triumph takes place by remaining less or approximating nothing. To put it differently, the imposition of nothing imparts an inherently duplicitous nature to the Idea of ontology: remaining is at the same time a vitalistic persistence and an intensive decay on the part of a problematic intimacy with nothing. Decay conveys this duplicity in the most subtle manner where the Idea of *remaining per se* becomes that of *remaining less* and the Idea of ontology as such coincides with the second necrosis.

Correlated to this double-dealing solution, not only is the problem betrayed, but also the Ideal is undermined by virtue of its correlation with the problem. Rather than securing the Ideal as ground, the correlation between the solution (i.e. remaining) and the problem (i.e. explaining the Ideal) perforates and ungrounds the Ideal with nothing. If the correlation between solution and problem is built upon a double-betrayal and the duplicity of solution, then such correlation twists itself out of its assumed intension rather than terminating it – That is, given that this assumed intention is either that of exposing the Ideal or that of effectuating the Idea of *something* (anything) through remaining. The Idea of correlation – that is, the correlation between solution and problem – does not need to be terminated so that *nothing* can be imposed. On the contrary, the correlation *per se* is what is fundamentally needed to bring about the

imposition of nothing as the exposition of the problematic. By problematic we mean the submission to the priority of nothing in order to effectuate the Idea of something or the short-circuiting of ontological intention with the intervention of nothing in order to bring about the possibility of ontology. In pursuing the ontological intension of the Ideal, the correlation between the solution and the problem traffics and imposes the intention of nothing as the implicit constitutional necessity and the radical exterior of the Ideal and its intention. Correlation, in this sense, is equal to the very Idea of twist (*flectere*), for which inflection (pursuing the intension of correlativity) is already a deflection (inviting that which is radically exterior to that intention). In twisting into something, the correlation between solution and problem, twists into nothing; and in twisting into nothing such correlation twists back into something. Only through these twists in and out can the Idea of something be resonant. The correlation between solution and problem is effectuated as intensive decay or depthwise putrefaction (*nigredo*), but it is the twist of correlation that makes for the peculiarly vermicular sinuosity of implicit putrefaction, the second necrosis. If the explicit necrosis, the coupling of the soul with the body is differentially consummated by worms' bridging of the dead and the supposedly living, the second necrosis or the tie between the soul and the intellect is vermicularly completed by the correlation as twist.

By adhering to *remaining so and as such* as a fitting ontological medium, the One submits to the intension of that which bores through it. Once the Idea of correlation is established, it refracts toward the problematic and is adopted by the Idea of twist. As what necessitates the intervention of nothing, the correlation between solution and problem

renders the fate of *being something* entirely problematic. At the same time it makes the destinies of the Ideal, the problem and the solution indeterminable in themselves by factoring in the exteriority of nothing as another determinant to which they have no access and over which they have no influence. Given that the destiny of the Ideal is to survive at all costs, the destiny of the problem is to expose the Ideal and the destiny of the solution is to locate (*chorizein*) an ontological medium that encompasses the problem, the Ideal and the solution. In this regard, correlation-as-twist is also twist-as-destiny (*wyrd*). If the Ideal anticipates the correlation between the solution and the problem, then twist as correlation can also operate under the aegis of the Ideal. Corresponding to the explicit and implicit necroses of the soul and the Etruscan metaphysical cruelty, correlation as twist also operates through two concurrent waves of distortion. The explicit twist of correlation is the Idea of ontology that is generated under the aegis of nothing qua non-belonging or disjunctive exteriority. The implicit twist – more insidious than the first – is the problematic intervention of nothing under the shroud of the ontological medium or the reign of the Ideal. In this sense, the Ideal becomes a necessary excuse to transmit the intention of nothing in the form of the problematic. Whether on the side of the Idea of ontology or that of nothing, the problematic as twist becomes more intricate as each side maintains its position by conforming to the reason that either bilaterally or unilaterally supports it. As the problematic intertwines with reason, it unleashes the problematizing powers inherent to reason as a double-dealer. Once reason and the problematic copulate, the Idea of reason comes forth as that through which nothing can reside outside the pandemonium of the problematic either in supporting itself or the other.

What is at stake here is not reason as glorified tool of disclosure or sponsor of quixotic ventures toward the intellect, but rather the chameleon nature of reason unmasked by the problematic. Bound to the problematic, the animation of reason spawns writhing coils, convolutions, bends and ogees – worms, ratios of putrefaction.

The Idea of survival or the persistence of the remaining characterises the problematic both as the Idea of perforation between the problem and the Ideal, and as the twist between solution and problem. The Ideas of perforation and twist are inherent to the machinery of putrefaction and decay for which remaining less is persistence in remaining, which in turn is insistence upon nothing in the form of the problematic. Only through diminution or intensive decay, which binds survival to the problematic, can the remaining be posited as the solution to the problem of exposing Ideals. Nothing inside the Idea or encompassed by it, can invest itself outside of decay; putrefaction becomes the generative medium of the Idea. In order to be revealed or effectuated, the Ideal must not only remain in itself but must also be bound to decay. The revelation of any truth whatsoever is conducted through decay; but decay is the radically problematic – the Idea. In its intensive and implicit form, decay is problematic intimacy with nothing qua non-belonging; it is the intensive movement of the Idea according to its ontological medium and intention. The Idea of persistence in remaining or persistence in general immanently points to decay as the solution where the continuity of remaining is sponsored by nothing; thereby, the problematic imposes itself regardless of the objective of the ontological medium and its vitalistic impetus. Whether the act of remaining is bound to the intention of the Idea, the Ideal, the problem or the solution,

the problematic is enacted. In short, regardless of what shrinkage through remaining entails, the Idea of remaining as such always envelops an encounter with nothing under the heading of the problematic.

### MEZENTIUSIAL METAPHYSICS

The fact is that every living thing among us suffers the torment of Mezentius - that the living perish in the embrace of the dead: and although the vital nature enjoys itself and runs things for a while, the influence of parts nevertheless gets the upper hand not long afterwards, and does so according to the nature of the substance and not at all to the nature of the living one.<sup>10</sup>

The vitalizing forces of the soul move in the direction of two necroses, vectorially opposite but functionally synergistic and collusive. The soul is a bicephalous necrosis. The extensive deployment of the soul through the body is equal to the synthesis of the Idea with that which does not belong to it, while the intensive employment of the soul in itself and according to the intellect is the necessary intention of the Idea. More succinctly, the coupling of the soul with the body is the outward and extensive activity of the Idea and the soul in itself as the activity of the intellect is the inward or intensive activity of the Idea. The outward activity of the Idea is marked by contingency, yet its inward activity is defined by necessity. Only through the two necroses can the necessary and contingent activities of the soul or the Idea be correlated to each other. In the same way, the creativity of the Idea, as correlation between its contingent / extensive and necessary / intensive activities, is only possible through the two necroses. The first necrosis couples the Idea (X) with that which does not belong to it (not-X) in order to

extend it beyond itself; it is caused by the profit-seeking or economical openness of X to not-X. The second necrosis, the persistence of the Idea or the progress in the direction of proper perfection by virtue of imposing the primacy and priority of nothing; it is entailed by the survival of X or the possibility of the Idea in its temporal continuation. The Idea in its creativity is the distance between survival and openness. By openness we mean the extensive deployment of the Idea according to that which does not belong to it; by survival, the intensive employment of the Idea according to its ontological medium or its proper objective. Whilst establishing continuity between openness and survival, this distance also posits a subtractive correlation between them.

By virtue of this distance, openness and survival, the first and the second necroses negatively reinforce and contribute to each other. Through this distance or subtractive space, investment in openness contributes to survival or remaining which, simultaneously, coincides with diminution (remaining less) and closure (remaining in itself). Conversely, the immersion in survival is a contribution to openness, yet it is openness in terms of that which does not belong to the Idea (not-X) or is not the subject of its survival. Creativity is therefore the *art of ratios*<sup>11</sup> between openness and survival, or to be exact, between the first and second necroses. The subtractive space or the distance between openness and survival maintains the Idea between two necroses; but even the two necroses have to encompass this space to reinforce each other. The subtractive space between openness to the body and remaining according to the intellect is defined as the *third necrosis*; for it is the space where only death can enter and death is the only outcome.

10. Francis Bacon, *De Vitis Mortis*, VI 357.

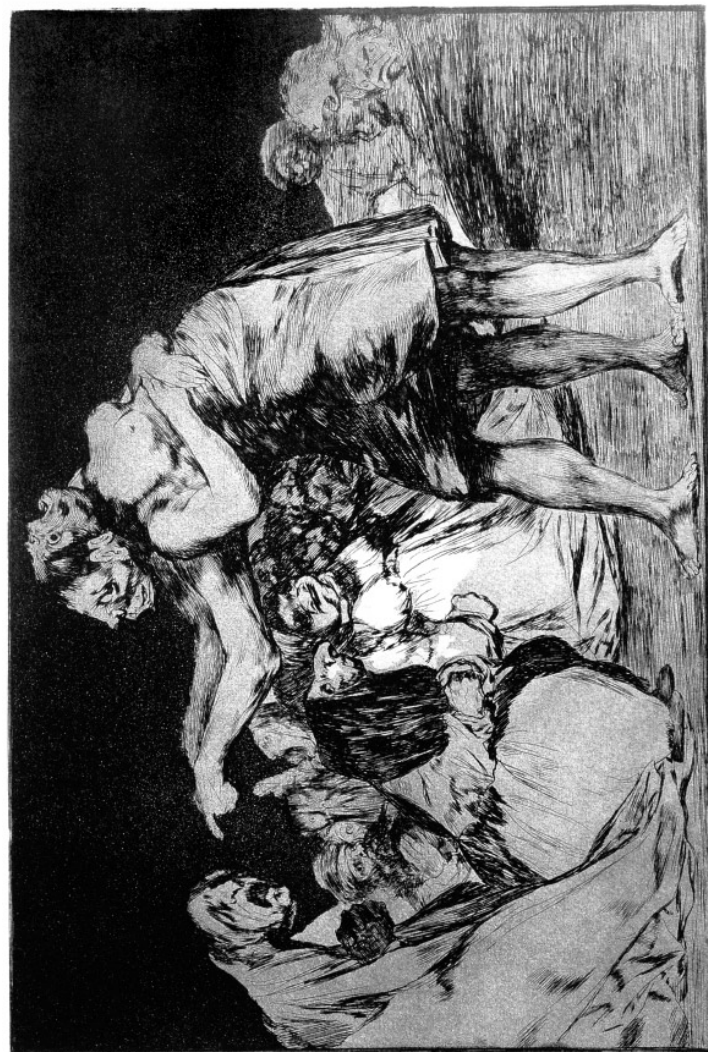
11. Here, the word 'art' is employed in its Lullian connotation.

## COLLAPSE IV

The third necrosis of the soul or the Idea simultaneously binds and unbinds the first and the second necroses; it is the effectuation of correlation as subtraction or the impossibility of addition. The third necrosis is the *vinculum of doom*, the bond through which every contribution, every investment and every impetus is subtractively – and not additively – engendered. Change through subtraction, or the mobilization of extensive and intensive vectors in regard to each other, is the very Idea of decay.

In its gradation (step-by-step movement) between the body, the soul and the intellect, reason aligns with three necroses; the truth it confirms is predominantly determined by the ternary logic of three deaths. More gravely, with regard to the connection between reason and truth, whatever necrosis reason invokes, the two other necroses will join the gathering. One should not forget that the three necroses of the soul are firmly fastened to each other in the same way that the three necroses of the Idea are subtractively tied together. Accordingly, for reason, there is always a crowd of deaths. The movement of reason is the enumeration or counting of these deaths. The first, second and third necroses, at poles and their in-between: ‘It is strange’, Reason shrugs; ‘all roads lead to the bosom of the dead.’

Fig. 2 (Facing Page): Goya’s *Disparates* plate no. 7, The ‘Matrimonial’ – or, according to a trial proof, ‘Disordered’ – Disparate (folly, nightmare) introduces a curious adaptation of Andrea Alciato’s emblem regarding marriage by force to a corpse or a man seared with syphilitic scabs. In Goya’s depiction, the coupling of the living with a putrid corpse is already a fiendish redundancy, for the supposed living cannot come into being other than by being fixed upon a phantom rotting double. When the implicit necrosis of the living is extended to the explicit necrosis of the dead, it begets a nonhuman deformity, a quadrupedal necrosis each of whose four legs – now two – have already been amalgamated by putrefaction.

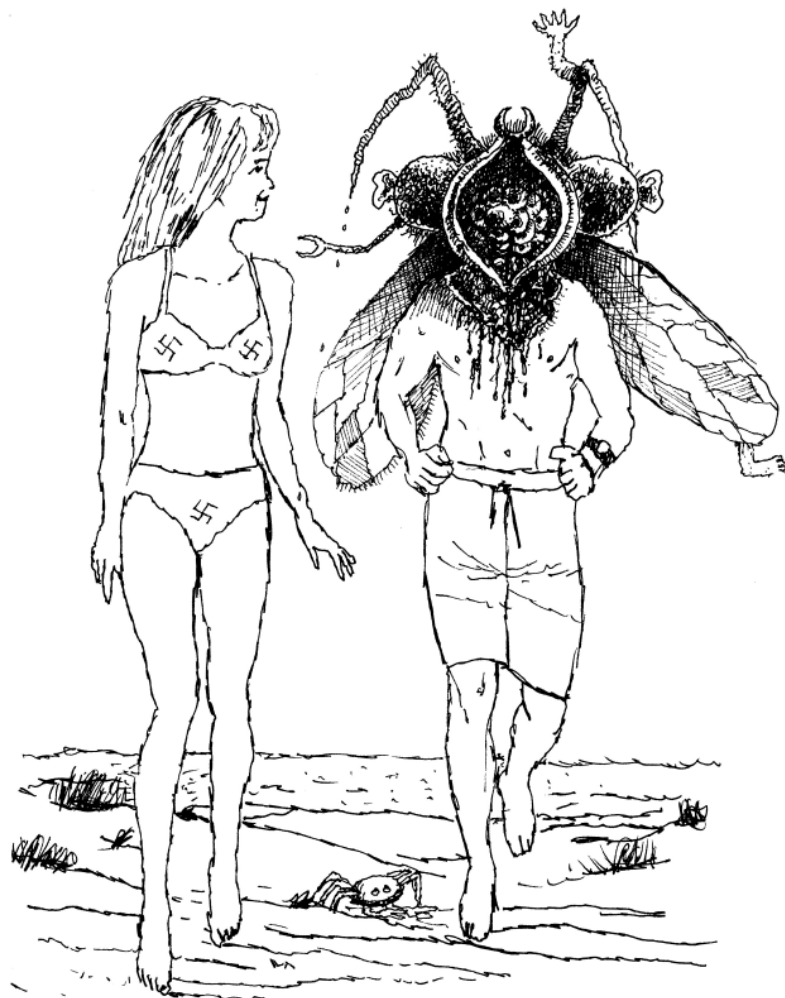


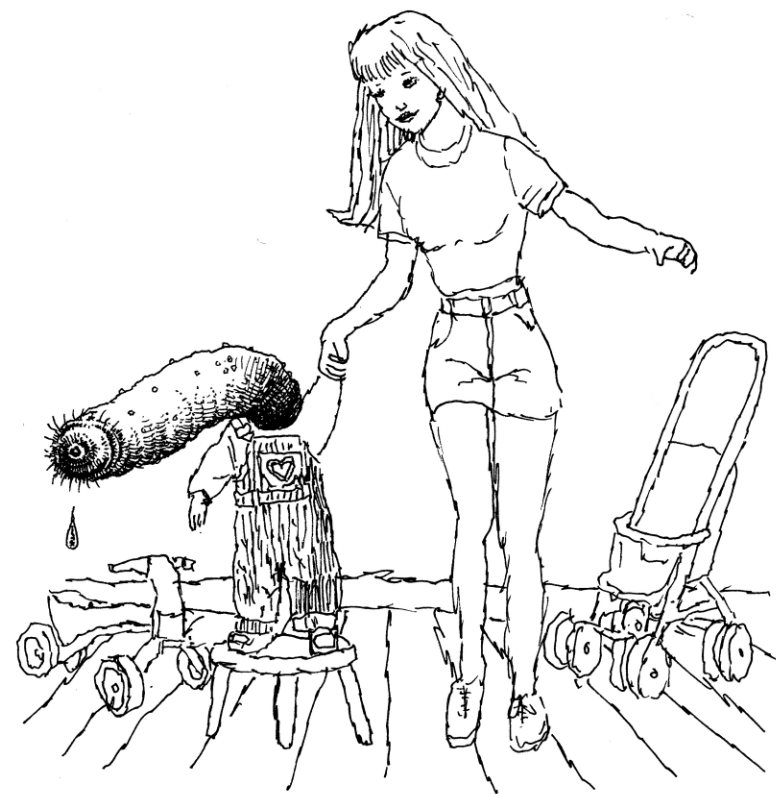
## I Can See

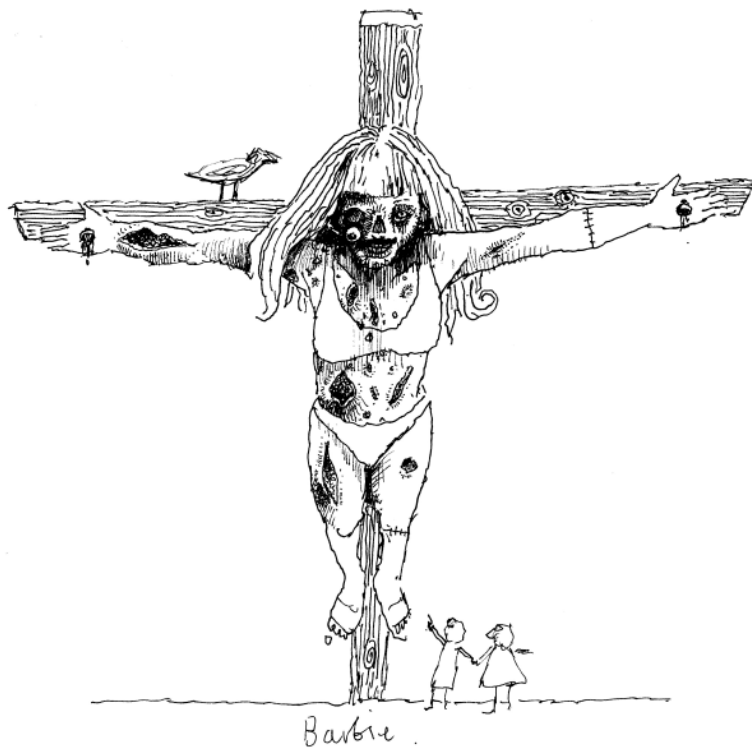
Jake and Dinos Chapman

Pen and ink drawings, 2008.













Poems<sup>1</sup>

Michel Houellebecq

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1. Selected from *Le sens du combat* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996) and *La Poursuite du Bonheur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).

**A LIFE, SMALL**

I felt old very soon after my birth;  
 Others struggled, desired, sighed;  
 I felt within myself only a vague regret.  
 I never had anything resembling a childhood.

Deep in some woods, on a carpet of moss,  
 Foetid tree trunks survive their leaves;  
 Around them develops an atmosphere of mourning;  
 Their skin filthy and black, mushrooms pushing through it.

I have never been any use for anything or to anyone;  
 A shame – one lives badly when one lives only for oneself.  
 The slightest movement constitutes a problem,  
 One feels unhappy and yet generic.

One is obscurely driven, like an animalcule;  
 Reduced almost to nothing, and yet how one suffers!  
 Carrying along a sort of void  
 Portable and petty, vaguely ridiculous.

One no longer sees death as a tragic event;  
 Mostly on principle, from time to time, one laughs;  
 One tries vainly to accede to contempt.  
 Then we accept all, and death does the rest.

I love those hospitals, asylums of suffering  
 Where the elderly, forgotten, slowly turn into organs  
 Beneath the gazes, mocking and full of indifference  
 Of junior doctors who scratch themselves, eating bananas.

In their hygienic but nonetheless sordid rooms  
 You can easily divine the nothingness that stalks them  
 Especially when, in the morning, they sit up, livid,  
 And plead with a whine for their first cigarette.

The old know how to weep with a minimum of sound,  
 They forget thoughts and they forget gestures  
 They no longer laugh much, and all that remains of them  
 At the end of a few months, before the final phase,

Are a few phrases, almost always the same:  
 Thank you I am not hungry my son is coming on Sunday.  
 I can feel my intestines, my son will come all the same.  
 And the son is not there, and their hands almost white.

So many hearts have beaten, already, upon this earth  
And the little objects curled up in their cupboards  
Recount the sinister and lamentable story  
Of those who had no love upon this earth.

The crockery of old bachelors,  
The tarnished cutlery of the war-widow  
My god! And the handkerchiefs of old spinsters  
The insides of cupboards, how cruel life is!

The objects all arranged and life all empty  
And the evening meals, the grocers' leftovers  
TV unwatched, repast without appetite.

Finally illness, making everything more sordid,  
And the tired body that mingles with the earth,  
The never-loved body that fades away without mystery.

At the age of seventeen, my sister was very ugly,  
In eighth grade they called her double-fatty.  
One November morning she jumped in the lake;  
But they fished her out; the water was yellow and troubled.

Curled up under the bedspread like an great obese rat,  
She dreamt of a serene and barely-conscious life  
With no social relations and no hope of a screw,  
But tranquil, so gentle, almost evanescent.

The next morning she perceived forms,  
Light and fleeting, on the wall to her right.  
She said stay with me, I must not sleep;  
I see a great Jesus, in the distance, he's limping.

She said I'm a little scared, but it couldn't be any worse.  
Do you think he'll come back? I'll put on a blouse.  
I can see little houses, there's a whole village;  
It's so lovely, down there. Is it going to hurt?

Death is so difficult for old ladies who are too rich  
Surrounded by daughters-in-law who call her “sweetie”,  
Pressing a silken handkerchief to their magnificent eyes,  
Evaluating the paintings and the antique furniture.

I prefer the death of those old people in the tower-blocks  
Who still imagine right to the end that they are loved,  
Awaiting the arrival of hypothetical sons  
Who will pay for a coffin in real fir.

The old, too-rich ladies end up in the cemetery,  
Surrounded by cypresses and plastic shrubs  
A nice promenade for sexagenarians,  
The cypresses smell good and keep away the mosquitoes.

The old people in the tower-blocks end up at the crematorium,  
In a little case with a white label.  
The building is calm; no-one, even on Sundays,  
Disturbs the sleep of the very old black janitor.

Where is my subtle body? I feel the night coming on,  
Pricked with needles and electric shocks  
Noises come from far away into a confined space:  
The rumbling city, anecdotal machine.

Tomorrow I'll go out, I'll leave my room,  
I'll walk, worn-out, on a dead boulevard,  
Summer women, their bodies that arch and curve  
Will be renewed amidst fastidious decor.

Tomorrow there will be *salades auvergnates*  
In bustling cafés where managers chew;  
Today is Sunday. May the splendour of God reign!  
I just bought myself a rubber doll.

And I see bloody stars flying  
I see punctured eyes sliding across the walls;  
Mary, mother of God, protect my child!  
The night clambers onto me like an unclean beast.

At the corner of FNAC a crowd simmers  
Very dense and very cruel  
A huge dog chews the body of a white pigeon.  
Further away, in the alley,  
An old homeless woman curled up into a ball  
Is spat on by kids without speaking a word.

I was alone, rue de Rennes. Electric signs  
Directed me along vaguely erotic paths.  
Hi it's Amandine.  
I felt nothing in my prick.  
A few yobs passed a menacing gaze  
Over the rich girls and the salacious shows.  
The managers consume. It is their only function.  
And you were not there. I love you, Véronique.

## NATURE

I have no time for those pompous imbeciles  
Who go into ecstasies before bunnies' burrows  
Because nature is ugly, tedious and hostile;  
It has no message to transmit to humans.

How pleasant, at the wheel of a powerful Mercedes,  
To drive through solitary and grandiose places;  
Subtly manipulating the gearstick.  
You dominate the hills, the rivers, and all things.

The forests, so close, glitter in the sun  
And seem to reflect ancient knowledges;  
In the depths of their valleys must lie such marvels,  
After a few hours you are taken in;

Leaving the car, the irritations begin;  
You stumble into the middle of a repugnant mess,  
An abject universe, deprived of all meaning  
Made of stones and brambles, flies and snakes.

You miss the parking-lots and the smell of petrol,  
The serene, gentle glint of the nickel counters;  
It's too late. It's too cold. The night begins.  
The forest enfolds you in its cruel dream.

## HYPERMARKET – NOVEMBER

Firstly I stumbled into a freezer  
 I started to cry and I felt a little afraid.  
 Someone grumbled that I was spoiling the atmosphere;  
 To retain an air of normality I carried on.

Commuters, drained, with brutal gaze  
 Walked up and down slowly near the mineral water,  
 A rumour of the circus and of semi-vice  
 Mounted from the shelves. My gait was clumsy.

I collapsed at the cheese counter;  
 There were two old ladies carrying sardines.  
 The first turned and said to her neighbour:  
 “It’s really sad, though, a boy of that age.”

And then I saw very broad, circumspect feet;  
 There was a salesman who took measurements.  
 Many seemed surprised by my new shoes;  
 For the last time I was a little on the margins.

## END OF THE EVENING

At the end of the evening, the rise of despair is an inevitable phenomenon. There is a kind of timetable of horror. Well, I don’t know; I think so.

The expansion of the internal void. That’s what it is. A taking-flight of every possible event. As if you were suspended in the void, equidistant from every real action, by monstrously powerful magnetic forces.

Thus suspended, incapable of any concrete grip on the world, the night can seem so long to you. And, indeed, it will be.

It will be, however, a protected night; but you will not appreciate this protection. You will only appreciate it later, once you return to the city, once you return to the day, once you return to the world.

Around nine o’clock, the world will already have attained its full level of activity. It will turn smoothly, with a gentle whirring. You will have to take part in it, to jump in – a little as if one jumped onto the footplate of a shuddering train ready to leave the station.

You don’t make it. Once more, you await the night – which, however, once more, will bring you exhaustion, uncertainty and horror.

And this will happen again, every day, until the end of the world.



## The Shadow of a Puppet Dance: Metzinger, Ligotti and the Illusion of Selfhood

James Trafford

*There are no people, nothing at all like that.*

Thomas Ligotti

*No such things as selves exist in the world:*

*Nobody ever was or had a self.*

Thomas Metzinger

### **I. BEING NO-ONE**

In his *Being No-One*,<sup>1</sup> Thomas Metzinger sets out a radical challenge to any philosophical defence of the status of subjective self-consciousness against the incursions of reductive neuroscience. Deploying all the resources of a nascent science of consciousness, Metzinger proposes at a stroke to eliminate selves from the ontological horizon and to destroy our most cherished ‘originary’ intuitions about ‘ourselves’ and our place in the world. Such intuitions

furnish the precondition for the phenomenological description of the world that distinguishes between natural, manifest appearances and the supervening artifices of theoretical knowledge. By staking out a supposedly ‘unobjectifiable’ domain of subjectivity, philosophy has sought to maintain its distance from the coruscating potency of neuroscience. Husserl’s so-called ‘principle of all principles’ provides perhaps the most radical expression of this kind of philosophical presupposition: ‘that every originary, presentive intuition is a legitimising source of cognition, that everything originarily offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented’.<sup>2</sup> But it is precisely the legitimacy of such ‘pre-theoretical’ intuitions that Metzinger problematises, on the grounds that even appearances themselves are never immediately ‘manifest’ to the conscious subject who experiences them. Working across several levels of explanation, Metzinger is not only able to draw out a tractable science of consciousness, but to expose consciousness’ ‘naïve realism’ about its own states.

Despite formidable technical complexity, the upshot of Metzinger’s analyses could not be more clear: ‘no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self’.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, ‘consciousness is *only* appearance’.<sup>4</sup>

1. T. Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (London: MIT Press, 2004).

2. E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 44. This is concurrent with Husserl’s call to get ‘back to the things themselves, questioning them in their self-givenness, and laying aside all prejudices alien to them.’ (Husserl, *Ideas I* section 19)

3. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 1.

4. T. Metzinger, ‘Appearance is Not Knowledge: The Incoherent Strawman, Content-

According to Metzinger, organisms are not selves; rather, they possess ‘self-models’ which cannot be recognised by the system that employs them. All that exist are specific information processing systems engaged in self-modelling, but whose models cannot be correlated with any ostensibly ‘real’ items in the world. Metzinger thereby eliminates substantive subjectivity in favour not of reduction as such, but of tractable explanation. Rather than reducing the self, he uses the scientific resources at his command to produce a functional model of what ‘selves’ must be: ‘The phenomenal self is not a thing, but a process – and the subjective experience of *being someone* emerges if a conscious information processing system operates under a transparent self-model’.<sup>5</sup>

Expanding upon Wilfred Sellar’s attack on the ‘Myth of the Given’ – ‘the idea that some of our beliefs or claims have a privileged epistemic status because the facts that make them true are “given” to us by experience’<sup>6</sup> – Metzinger claims that our folk-philosophical intuitions are a direct result of the bounds of our cognition, as expressed in the limitations of our phenomenal state-space. He illustrates this with a naturalist substantiation of Plato’s allegory of the cave, predicated on the argument that ‘our phenomenal model of reality is an internal model of reality that could, at any time, in principle, turn out to be quite far removed from a much more high-dimensional physical reality

Content Confusions and Mindless Conscious Subjects’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11:1 (2004), 67-71.

5. T. Metzinger, ‘Response to “A Self Worth Having”: A Talk With Nicholas Humphrey’, at <http://www.edge.org/discourse/self.html#metzinger> (2003).

6. S. Stich, *Deconstructing the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 118.

than we have ever thought of'.<sup>7</sup> The 'cave' is the physical organism; the shadows, a 'low-dimensional projection of a higher dimensional object'; the fire is neural dynamics, i.e. the 'self-regulating flow of neural information processing'; the wall is the space of phenomenology, though the wall and fire are not separate entities. In sum, '[t]he cave in which we live our conscious life is formed by our global, phenomenal model of reality'.<sup>8</sup> In line with some of the bolder suggestions proposed by contemporary physicists,<sup>9</sup> then, Metzinger's analogy proposes that phenomenological perception may well be imprisoned within a virtual model, in which an experienced object is merely a 'low-dimensional shadow of the actual physical object in your hands, a dancing shadow in your central nervous system'.<sup>10</sup> The crucial and far-reaching difference from Plato's cave, however, is that this illusion is, quite literally, *no-one's* illusion: 'there is no-one in the cave [...] The cave shadow is there. The cave itself is empty.'<sup>11</sup>

In the following, we will use speculative theses implied by Thomas Ligotti's suffocating, hallucinogenic horror<sup>12</sup> to

7. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 548.

8. Ibid., 546.

9. See, for example, the postulation of extra dimensions of space-time in superstring theory, about which physicist Brian Greene writes that: 'the discovery of extra dimensions would show that the entirety of human experience had left us completely unaware of a basic and essential aspect of the universe. It would forcefully argue that even those features of the cosmos that we have thought to be readily accessible to human senses need not be' (B. Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Space, Time and the Texture of Reality* (London: Penguin Science, 2005), 19).

10. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 548-9.

11. Ibid., 549-50.

12. Very briefly, Ligotti's horror is characterised by a claustrophobic discrepancy between realism and oneirism, in which the world is illusional, and the real inconsistent

draw out some of the ramifications of Metzinger's theses. Our fundamental contention is that, just as the expropriation of subjectivity which is the fundamental theme of Ligotti's fiction finds an unexpected realist basis in Metzinger's philosophical naturalism, so, conversely, Ligotti's own metaphysical 'irrealism' affords resources through which the 'unimaginable' consequences of Metzinger's naturalistic 'nemocentrism' can be brought into speculative focus.<sup>13</sup>

## II. PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE FICTION OF EXPERIENCE

Metzinger argues that neuroscience circumvents the supposedly irreducible ambit of self-consciousness and dissolves self-intimacy through the objectivation of the mechanisms of subjectivity. It is the non-intuitability of these mechanisms themselves that gives rise to qualitative experience – an experience which is thus constituted by its very inability to access the impersonal mechanisms which make the phenomenal simulation of self possible. This phenomenal simulation is *transparent* to experience: 'we do

and autonomous. Hence, Ligotti inverts the very possibility of redemption: The close-ness of world is disclosed in grotesque fabulation to be utterly autonomous in exactly the same moment as it is revealed that the mind is equally autonomous from the normative phenomenal experience of man. See, for example, T. Ligotti, *Crampton* (Poplar Bluff, MO: Mythos Books, 2002); T. Ligotti, 'I Have a Special Plan For This World' in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Random House, 2008); T. Ligotti, 'Mad Night of Atonement' in *Noctuary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994); T. Ligotti, 'The 'Tsalal' in *Noctuary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994); and T. Ligotti, 'The Sect of the Idiot' in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1989).

13. 'A nemocentric reality model is one that satisfies a sufficiently rich set of constraints for conscious experience [...] while at the same time not exemplifying phenomenal selfhood. It may be functionally egocentric, but it is phenomenologically selfless. It would, while still being a functionally centred representational structure, not be accompanied by the phenomenal experience of being *someone*' (Metzinger, *Being No One*, 336). Nemocentrism, for Metzinger, is a phenomenologically unimaginable possibility; however, it is a possibility that is perfectly conceivable and neurobiologically possible (see Metzinger, *Being No One*, op.cit.).

not experience phenomenal states *as* phenomenal states [...] [we] *look through them*.<sup>14</sup> Metzinger regularly alludes to fully immersive virtual reality to illustrate his thesis: 'We do not experience our conscious field as a cyberspace generated by our brain, but simply as reality itself, with which we are in contact in a natural and unproblematic way.'<sup>15</sup> Folk psychology's agenda is driven by a first person logic, occupying a perspectival and geometric structure that is temporally and spatially individuated.<sup>16</sup> This first-person perspective, however, is simply the phenomenal self-model, which Metzinger considers amenable to a neurobiological description, most likely involving parallel distributed processing (PDP), and a functional description: 'the phenomenal self-model is a plastic, multimodal structure'.<sup>17</sup>

First-person phenomenal experience is thus formulated as an empirical ideality, an empty fiction that is plastic, and therefore highly dependent upon the idiosyncrasies of the species. Effectively, the first-person perspective is a generation of worldhood, 'a *phenomenal* cosmology'.<sup>18</sup> The layers of simulation that coalesce into phenomenal experience encapsulate the intuition of phenomenal

14. T. Metzinger, 'The Problem of Consciousness' in *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1995) 11.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

16. Folk psychology attributes a unique and direct causal link from a selection process for volition as the cause of behaviour. Metzinger takes this causal link to be untenable, so that; 'it is not only that folk psychology is false - it is the content of the conscious self-model that attributes a causal relation between two events represented within it' (Metzinger, *Being No One*, 360). Folk psychology is therefore both false and hallucinatory from a scientific, third person account.

17. T. Metzinger and B. Walde, 'Commentary on Jakab's "Ineffability of Qualia", *Consciousness and Cognition* 9 (2000), 352-62.

18. Metzinger, 'The Problem of Consciousness', 6.

cosmology which, from the third person perspective, is understood to be a representational and functional property which can be analysed *in its entirety* on this basis.<sup>19</sup> 'Selves' in the full-blooded ontological sense, then, fall victim to Ockham's razor:

Under a general principle of ontological parsimony, it is not necessary (or rational) to assume the existence of selves, because as theoretical entities they fulfil no indispensable explanatory function [...] All that can be explained by the phenomenological notion of a 'self' can also be explained using the representationalist notion of a transparent self-model.<sup>20</sup>

Even the most elementary components of phenomenality are unavailable to the self. For example, Metzinger argues that, in order to draw logical concepts from phenomenal content, and therefore to have epistemic and justified belief with regard to simple forms of phenomenal content, transtemporal identity criteria would have to be assumed, drawn directly from material identity criteria.<sup>21</sup> In that case, the abstraction of logic or ontology from experience would necessitate the indubitability of the self-manifestation of appearances: 'letting apparition show *itself* in its appearance according to its appearance'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, phenomenological appearance is rooted in an originary field of self-identity which, removing the imposition of

19. See Metzinger, *Being No One*, 577. However, Metzinger suggests that this might not be a rational choice in all contexts, drawing a clear distinction between his work and the Churchlands'.

20. *Ibid.*

21. For a phenomenological account in which this is indeed assumed to be the case, see J-L. Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J. Kosky (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 7ff.

22. *Ibid.*, 8.

the conceptual *a priori*, claims to return ‘things’ to lived experience, and to the fleshly actuality of consciousness. According to Metzinger, we only assume the reliability of this primitive self-identity on the assumption that ‘in our subjective experience of sensory sameness we carry out a phenomenal representation of this transtemporal identity on the object level in an automatic manner, which already carries its epistemic justification in itself.’ – and ‘[i]t is precisely this background assumption which is false.’<sup>23</sup> The transtemporal criteria necessary for the subjective individuation and consequent logical identity are simply unavailable to subjective introspection, so that phenomenal concepts are *a priori* incapable of being introspectively formed. Phenomenological primitives, supposedly straightforwardly given to the conscious subject, are incapable of providing even the most basic conceptual traction on the data of consciousness. Hence, as Metzinger argues:

The phenomenological approach in philosophy of mind, at least with regard to those simple forms of phenomenal content, is due to failure; a descriptive psychology cannot come into existence with regard to almost all of the most simple forms of phenomenal content [...] The neural and functional correlates of the corresponding phenomenal states can, in principle, provide us with transtemporal identity criteria as well as with those logical identity criteria for which we have been looking. Neurophenomenology is possible; phenomenology is impossible.<sup>24</sup>

Only through the objective scientific circumvention of self-conscious experience is it possible to gain traction on

23. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 82.

24. Metzinger, ‘Commentary on Jakob’s “Ineffability of Qualia”’.

the specific reality of both the manifest and non-manifest elements of phenomenal consciousness.

### III. TRANSPARENCY: A SPECIAL FORM OF DARKNESS

The phenomenal self comes about through a ‘special form of epistemic darkness’ – essentially, the inability of the subject to represent the conditions of its own intuitions. Folk psychology posits that the world is given immediately to subjective consciousness; it assumes that the experience of phenomenal content is transparent to the self. Metzinger argues, on the contrary, that immediacy is an illusory experience of the ‘outside’ world:

From an epistemological perspective, we see that our phenomenal states at no point in time establish a direct and immediate contact with the world for us [...] However, on the level of phenomenal representation [...] this fact is systematically suppressed.<sup>25</sup>

In a direct inversion of the traditional notion of the transparency of inner sense, Metzinger argues that transparency, as an essential characteristic of phenomenal experience, illuminates the phenomenological fallacy of *pure* experience and the ‘subjective impression of immediacy’. Naïve realism is not, therefore, a philosophical theory as such; it is the global character of intuition, once the latter is understood in terms of phenomenal content locally supervening on neurobiological properties. Opacity, as opposed to transparency, occurs when appearances are cognised *as* appearances. Hence, our primitive pre-reflective feeling of conscious selfhood is *never* truthful, in that it does not correspond to any single entity *inside* or *outside* of the self-representing

25. Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 59.

system.<sup>26</sup> The culmination of this inversion of the concept of transparency is indicated by the fact that transparency is a form of darkness: 'With regard to the phenomenology of visual experience transparency means that we are not able to see something, because it is transparent. We don't see the window but only the bird flying by. *Phenomenal* transparency in general, however, means that something particular is not accessible to subjective experience, namely, the representational character of the contents of conscious experience.'<sup>27</sup> The immediately given contents of the Phenomenal Self-Model (PSM) correspond neither to the sub-personal mechanisms underlying those contents, nor to any kind of external reality; the entire life-world is illusory, an 'online hallucination'.<sup>28</sup> Metzinger calls this feature of the self-model theory (SMT) 'autoepistemic closure' – that is, the closure and boundedness of processing in regard to internal dynamics. Autoepistemic closure allows for the availability of phenomenal content but not of the vehicle of content.<sup>29</sup>

26. See *ibid.*, 565.

27. *Ibid.*, 169. Metzinger elucidates this point: 'We do not have the feeling of living in a three-dimensional film or in an inner representational space: in standard situations our conscious life always takes place *in the world*. We do not experience our conscious field as a cyberspace generated by our brain, but simply as reality itself, with which we are in contact in a natural and unproblematic way. In standard situations the contents of pure experience are subjectively given in a direct and seemingly immediate manner. It is precisely in this sense that we can say: they are infinitely close to us.' (Metzinger, 'The Problem of Consciousness', 11-2).

28. See Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 51. As Metzinger puts it: 'The instruments of representation themselves cannot be represented as such anymore, and hence the experiencing system, by necessity, is entangled in a naive realism.' (*Ibid.*, 169).

29. The dualism of vehicle and content is not available for Metzinger; they cannot be understood as two distinct entities (see Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 166). More specifically then, transparency results from the: 'attentional unavailability of earlier processing stages in the brain for introspection. Transparency results from a structural / architectonic property of the neural information-processing going on in our brains' (T. Metzinger, 'Phenomenal Transparency and Cognitive Self-Reference',

However, as Metzinger is unwilling to split vehicle from content – which he believes would reify abstract content – transparency is further complexified by the assumption that there is a processual and physically realised *embodied* content.<sup>30</sup> Metzinger therefore effectively lays waste to functionalism's attempt to abstract the cognitive from actual physiological processes, an attempt which arguably already concedes the irreducible status of human sapience *vis-à-vis* its empirical substrate.

This, of course, is a characteristically modern philosophical distinction – the same one that allows Kant to maintain the autonomy of the transcendental subject from any empirical intervention or knowledge whatsoever. Through the *Critique of Pure Reason*'s so-called 'paradox of inner sense', Kant is able to maintain the transcendental status of the 'I think' without lapsing into pure idealism, which would necessarily conflate inner sense with consciousness.<sup>31</sup> Inner and outer sense are given in empirical perception as an intuitive whole, which is ultimately determined by the understanding through the transcendental synthesis of pure apperception.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the intuitive unity of subjective consciousness remains distinct from the transcendental

*Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 2 (2003), 353–93.

30. Hence, phenomenal transparency is distinguished from a Cartesian epistemic transparency; 'The Cartesian claim about the epistemic transparency of self-consciousness can itself not be epistemically justified.' (Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 167), though it is phenomenologically adequate (see Metzinger, *Being No-One*, 340).

31. This is key to Kant's critique of idealism and of the Cartesian subject; that they conflate inner sense with the conscious self.

32. Kant argues that: 'What determines inner sense is the understanding and its originary power of combining the manifold of intuition, that is, of bringing it under an apperception.' I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Meiklejohn, ed. V. Politis (London: Everyman, 1993), 111 (B153).

unity of apperception, the ‘I think’, that unifies the manifold of presentations into an object of experience.

Metzinger concurs with Kant on the futile nature of rational psychology, and similarly on his transcendental (rather than ontological) distinction between phenomenal content and reality. However, this transcendental *opacity*, for Kant, lies in the fact that there can be no transparent knowledge of the self – concomitant with which is the dissolution of the substantive self through the positing of a formal a priori ground of subjectivity. Hence, whilst Kant’s concept of ‘transcendental illusion’ certainly corresponds with what Metzinger terms ‘phenomenological illusion’ – that is, the drawing of epistemic conclusions from phenomenal experience – ultimately, Kant’s positing of a noumenal subjectivity commits the same fallacy that he had sworn to abjure. For, if Metzinger is correct, then the PSM undermines any attempt to transcendentalise subjectivity or consciousness, and the putatively noumenal substratum of inner sense can be cashed out in its entirety from within the ambit of scientific objectivity. Kant presupposed the unification of sense to be given through the unity of apperception that acts as the transcendental guarantor for the nomological consistency of appearances, and thus specifies ideal laws of appearance that have subsequently been shown to be rooted in empirical intuition. Metzinger disavows the role of syntactical invariance through his insistence on the sub-symbolic and immanent objectivity of the non-manifest element of consciousness.<sup>33</sup> The self-model is a

33. As Metzinger explicates: ‘the presence and striking holism of phenomenal reality [...] would no longer have to be explained in accordance with classical philosophical models *from above* (e.g. by a transcendental subject), if we had a good bottom-up alternative [...] called “feature binding” in the terminology of brain research: The fusion of different properties perceived by the system into a *holistic* internal structure.

*plastic* structure which can be neurobiologically described as a complex neural activation pattern. But furthermore, ‘[o]n a more abstract level the same pattern of physiological activity can also be described as a complex functional state’.<sup>34</sup> Since appearances are not discursively structured for Metzinger, he eradicates the autonomy of nomological consistency by rooting the manifestation of appearances in physical structures that are in no way dependent upon ideal (transcendental) laws.

Metzinger thus inverts Kantian ‘opacity’, arguing that it is not the transcendental opacity of the self that is primary, but the transparency of the self-model, which, through its objectivation, can become opaque, allowing for the cognising of appearances *as* appearances. It is our functional design that forces us into a naive realism, so that the explanation for semantic transparency is given by an evolutionary, rather than a transcendental, account: ‘for biological systems like ourselves – who always had to minimise the computational load [...] naive realism was a functionally adequate “background assumption” to achieve reproductive success [...] [there was] no evolutionary pressure on our representational architecture to overcome the naive realism inherent in semantic transparency’.<sup>35</sup>

Such a binding of properties is, for instance, necessary in enabling us to see objects *as* objects’ (Metzinger, ‘Faster than Thought: Holism, Homogeneity and Temporal Coding’, in *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1995), 435.

34. T. Metzinger, ‘The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience: A Representationalist Analysis of the First-Person Perspective’ in *Neural Correlates of Consciousness: Empirical and Conceptual Questions*, ed. T. Metzinger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 289.

35. Metzinger, *The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience*, 299.

## IV. THE IMMANENT OBJECTIVATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Kant safeguards the autonomy of philosophy via recourse to a notion of an a priori transcendental subjectivity which would circumscribe possible experience, rendering empirical science inherently incapable of investigating the objectivity of the object and the formal conditions of empirical actuality. And, whether overtly or not, much ‘continental philosophy’ remains wedded to the presupposition that science is supervenient on a set of concepts that are ideally embedded in the subject. This disjunction of the empirical sciences and philosophy arguably attains its most extreme formulation in Husserl’s conception of pure phenomenology as a transcendental-eidetic science whose bracketing of the world ensures that the natural sciences are confined to *res extensa*, thereby preserving an immanent plane of pure experience governed by an irreducible transcendental consciousness: ‘the existence of Nature cannot be the condition for the existence of consciousness, since Nature itself turns out to be a correlate of consciousness: Nature is only as being constituted in regular concatenations of consciousness’.<sup>36</sup> However, according to Metzinger, it is the very domain of pre-theoretical access which, despite all claims to the contrary, is ultimately tethered to the myopia of contingently – evolutionarily – circumscribed conditions of intuition. Phenomenology, rather than reaching into ‘the

36. E. Husserl, *Ideas*, Book 1, 116. See also Husserl’s account of phenomenology as an eidetic science: ‘phenomenological or pure psychology as an intrinsically primary and completely self-contained psychological discipline, which is also sharply separated from natural science, is, for very fundamental reasons, not to be established as an empirical science but rather as a purely rational (“apriori,” “eidetic”) science. As such it is the necessary foundation for any rigorous empirical science dealing with the laws of the psychic, quite the same way that the purely rational disciplines of nature pure geometry, kinematics, chronology, mechanics are the foundation for every possible “exact” empirical science of nature’ (Husserl, ‘Phenomenology: Entry for the Encyclopedia Britannica’, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 2, 1971: 77-90.

things themselves’, succeeds only in transcendentalising folk psychology. In the wake of Metzinger, consciousness must be conceived of as produced by immanent objective mechanisms, which are themselves sub-symbolic, non-linguistic, and unconscious, so that ‘pure self-reflection’ is exposed as caught within the obscurantism of an empirico-transcendental circularity.

Metzinger argues that where philosophy has long grappled with reason and representation, it is only now that representation has ‘through its semantic coupling with the concept of information, been transposed to the domain of mathematical precision and subsequently achieved empirical anchorage’.<sup>37</sup> Thus, ‘[c]onceptual progress by a combination of philosophy and empirical research programs is possible; conceptual progress by introspection alone is impossible in principle’.<sup>38</sup> Metzinger’s work constantly forces philosophy to take account of *objective* intelligence; the sub-personal production of phenomenality as a naturalised Kantianism. The objective structure of knowledge is invested with empirical contingency, as one among many objective procedures; man as a mass of info-theoretic computation packed densely through sedimented layers of transcendental deception.

## V. NEMOCENTRISM

Perhaps one of the most intriguing undercurrents of Metzinger’s book, albeit one that he does not expand upon, is the implicit suggestion that the interests of thought can be unbound from lived experience, and in many cases even

37. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 19.

38. *Ibid.*, 83.

opposed to the interests of life.<sup>39</sup> For example, in a general discussion of scientific realism, Metzinger writes that ‘there are aspects of the scientific world-view which may be damaging to our mental well-being’.<sup>40</sup> The object ‘man’ consists of tightly packed layers of simulation, for which naive realism becomes a necessary prophylactic in order to ward off the terror concomitant with the destruction of our intuitions regarding ourselves and our status in the world: ‘conscious subjectivity is the case in which a single organism has learned to enslave *itself*’.<sup>41</sup> It is at this point that Thomas Ligotti’s work can illuminate Metzinger’s thesis, offering a phenomenological purchase upon that which Metzinger has claimed to be impossible for the imagination – methodological nemocentrism.

Ligotti invokes the expropriation of subjective experience thus: ‘There are no people, nothing at all like that, the human phenomenon is but the sum of densely coiled layers of illusion, each of which winds itself upon the supreme insanity that there are persons of any kind’.<sup>42</sup> Ligotti couples this supreme insanity with a metaphysical irrealism regarding the substantive nature of the world. The supposedly foundational order of the phenomenal world is

39. This is consistent with our general critique of phenomenology, following Derrida’s characterisation of Husserl’s work as ‘a philosophy of life [...] because the source of sense in general is always determined as an act of living, as an act of a living being, as *Lebendigkeit*’ (J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 10). On this divorce between the interests of thought and those of life, see Ray Brassier’s *Nilhil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

40. Metzinger, ‘Response to “A Self Worth Having”’.

41. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 558. The self is mere appearance; ‘the conscious self is an illusion which is no-one’s illusion’ (Metzinger, ‘The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience’, 2000).

42. Ligotti, ‘I Have a Special Plan for this World’.

a mere semblance – and not a semblance of a supra-terrestrial realm, or an alien ‘Other’, but a semblance of the real world, which is utterly indifferent to the interests of organic life and thought. Ligotti thus unfolds some of the existential and phenomenological implications of Metzinger’s conceptualisation of the relative autonomy of appearances: His characters experience reality in a way that is utterly incommensurate with the phenomenological register of human perception.

Ligotti’s work is characterised by two movements which he refuses to separate: the subject’s passive dispossession of self-consciousness, and the ‘enlightenment of inanity’. This double movement unmasks the reality within which the characters have always been. The suffocating effect Ligotti achieves through this process is intensified by his staunch repudiation of any recourse to the supernatural; there is no possibility of escape. Hence, the *asceis* of the personal takes place within a positively insignificant reality, a realisation which dissolves both the intimacy of subjective experience, and the impersonal distance of the mechanics of that experience.

Ligotti’s phenomenological nemocentrism draws out this collapse of any securely demarcated ontological and epistemological foundations in a weird-fictional landscape filled with the ruins and ghosts of puppets. Throughout Ligotti’s work, the puppet figures as the insensate and sub-personal reality hidden beneath the ‘mindless mirrors’ of our naive reality. Puppets function as ‘conduits to the unreal’,<sup>43</sup> through whose agency hallucinatory phenomenality bleeds into a simultaneous concretisation of the

43. S.T. Joshi, ‘Thomas Ligotti: Escape From Life’, in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Evanston, MD: Wildside Press, 2003) 135.

oneiric. Life is played out as an inescapable puppet show, an endless dream in which the puppets are generally unaware that they are trapped within a mesmeric dance of whose mechanisms they know nothing, and over which they have no control. As Dziemianowicz notes in relation to Ligotti's 'Dreams of a Mannikin', the puppet's overriding affect is a suspicion that 'he and his entire world are merely a fictional diversion'.<sup>44</sup> The puppet is not merely an mocking parody of man, it is the unmasking of the animate face of insensate reality, the unveiling of the inexorable mechanics of the personal; 'There are no means for escaping this world. It penetrates even into your sleep and is its substance. You are caught in your own dreaming where there is no space. And are held forever where there is no time. You can do nothing you are not told to do. There is no hope for escape from this dream that was never yours. The very words you speak are only its very words.'<sup>45</sup> The irrepressible horror concomitant with Ligotti's concretisation of the oneiric stems from the *experience* of living in a 'three-dimensional film', a 'tunnel through an inconceivably high-dimensional reality'.<sup>46</sup> This phenomenal experience of nemocentrism ultimately dissolves both the intimacy of the personal and the distance of the impersonal; 'nothing's too small, nothing's too big. You lose your car keys, your wife gets run over by a semi, some nut blows up the capital of Pakistan'.<sup>47</sup> For this reason, the concretisation of the puppet

44. S. Dziemianowicz, 'Nothing Is What It Seems To Be', in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*, ed. D. Schweitzer (Evanston, MD: Wildside Press, 2003), 50. See T. Ligotti, 'Dreams of a Mannikin', in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*.

45. Ligotti, 'I Have a Special Plan for this World'.

46. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 551.

47. Ligotti, *Crampton*, 82.

concomitant with the increasing passivity of the narrator engenders an affect of universal claustrophobia through the implosion of the personal – which was, of course, never personal to begin with.

It is resolutely not the case, however, that the puppet-world is 'willed' into existence by an 'Other'; there is no puppet master pulling the strings.<sup>48</sup> Ligotti's systematic assault on empirical realism is not a result of the reinvigoration of the world with a Heraclitean flux, a pure productivity, or a contingent excess of materiality. Ligotti's real is 'positively' senseless, rigorously disabling any attempt to provide reality with substantive or ideal foundations by irreversibly severing its reciprocity with the pretensions of subjective thought. Ligotti can no more assume the existence of an extant and hypostatized nature than he can assume the necessary constancy of presence. The transcendental illusion exposed by Metzinger is expanded into a total disparity between the interests of life and the reality that life finds itself within. The secure foundations of the phenomenal and the real dissolve, not into a universal solipsism, but into a rigorous realism; 'it is not, in the end, a replacement of the real world by the unreal, but a sort of turning the real world inside out to show that it was unreal all along'.<sup>49</sup>

48. As Ligotti consistently maintains, the dissolution of the self cannot give way to a Schopenhaurian Will, as this reinstates some form of 'first philosophy' in the form of an underlying essence. See Ligotti, 'Tsalal'; 'You wrote that there is not true growth or evolution in the life of this world but only transformations of appearance, an incessant melting and molding of surfaces without underlying essence. Above all you pronounced that there is no salvation of any being because no beings exist as such, nothing exists to be saved – everything, everyone exists only to be drawn into the slow and endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives'.

49. Joshi, 'Thomas Ligotti', 139. Hence the statement; 'Nothing is real' (Ligotti, *Crampton*, 83), is not assumable under the idealising consequences of phenomenal immediacy.

Where Metzinger definitively resolves to destroy the possibility of the synthesis of man and nature, it is through Ligotti's phenomenological fictionalisation that the affective ramifications of this move are elucidated. Ligotti has developed a method of realising the absolute indifference of the real to the human and the personal through a metaphysical irrealism in which he disentangles appearances from both sufficient reason and originary manifestation by severing the nomological isomorphism of appearances and their substrate; in the end, subjectivity is simply a specific exacerbation of objectivity.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, an unforeseen consequence of Ligotti's inhabitation of Metzinger's epistemic nemocentricism is that Metzinger's naturalistic realism ends up providing traction on Ligotti's metaphysical irrealism: 'The horror and nothingness of human existence – the cosy facade behind which was only a spinning abyss.'<sup>51</sup> Phenomenal cosmology is not given by a structural syntax, but is simply an exacerbation of objective processes unconstrained by any form of ideality.

50. The dissolution of apodictic realism is continuous with the dissolution of apodictic thought; 'the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice, at most a point of view [...] things are not bolted down, so to speak. And no more is that thing which we call the mind' (T. Ligotti, 'The Cocoons' in *The Shadow at the Bottom of the World* [NY: Cold Spring Press, 2005], 164).

51. T. Ligotti, *Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (Forthcoming – see extract in present volume). This would entail the extraction of metaphysical naturalism from naturalistic realism, which is methodological rather than ontological. Accordingly, it is possible that naturalism may not be the most promising explanatory ground for Metzinger's self-model theory, as evolutionary ethology can be shown to ground a representational efficacy, but in order to extrapolate scientific realism on this basis, Metzinger would have to argue that nature is inherently functional, and therefore promoting a functional univocity. In this case, Metzinger would succumb to the charges that Stephen J. Gould poses to Daniel Dennett: making 'thinly veiled attempts to smuggle purpose back into biology' (S. J. Gould, *The Richness of Life: A Stephen Jay Gould Reader* [London: Vintage, 2007], 442). See D. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (London: Penguin, 1996).

Ligotti's horror, then, can be understood in terms of Metzinger's theory, in such a way as to grasp Ligotti's work as a fictional realisation of Metzinger's nemocentrism. Ligotti's horror is removed from the realm of the fantastic and given naturalistic traction through Metzinger's definition of man as the 'puppet shadow [that] dances on the wall of the neurophenomenological caveman's phenomenal state space'.<sup>52</sup> Equally, reading Metzinger alongside Ligotti, or as Ligottian theory-horror, accentuates the anomic terror of the arrogation of the self, as the folk psychological ascription of agency that is preserved in the artifice of natural language is extricated from the transcendental pretensions that phenomenology underwrites.

Finally, Ligotti enables us to recognise that the theoretic-practical resolve of Metzinger's theory is to be found not in the reduction of folk psychology, but in a kind of neuro-technology. Phenomenality and knowledge-weighting are malleable: 'the phenomenal self-model is a plastic, multimodal structure'<sup>53</sup> whose 'insertion and integration into other domains of information architecture amplify the potential for cognitive pliability'.<sup>54</sup> What is this but the naturalisation of the final outcome of Ligotti's fantastical puppet-dance: the realisation that underlying our parochial self-conceit is the impersonal reality of the meat-puppet.<sup>55</sup>

52. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 558.

53. Metzinger, 'The Subjectivity of Subjective Experience', 289.

54. See Metzinger; 'change the representational content of the conscious self-model [...] get some unconscious microfunctional output' (Metzinger, 'Response to "A Self Worth Having"').

55. The conjunction of Ligotti and Metzinger induces the definition of man as the shadow of a 'meat-puppet'. For a reading of man as a meat-puppet within contemporary science, see R. Doyle, *On Beyond Living: Rhetorical Transformations of the Life Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 36; see also its fictional realisation in the character of Molly in W. Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Voyager, 1984).

Here the objectivation of the world indicates its *real* condition, unveiling the inexorable mechanics of appearances as a prospect of hideous insanity – a hall of mindless mirrors unbound from the densely coiled layers of illusion that characterise the interests of life and the physiology of thought. Meanwhile, cognitive protectionism and organic enslavement ensure the oneiric aphasia of the shadow of the puppet dance:

To know, to understand in the fullest sense, is to plunge into an enlightenment of inanity, a wintry landscape of memory whose substance is all shadows and a profound awareness of the infinite spaces surrounding us on all sides. Within this space we remain suspended only with the aid of strings that quiver with our hopes and our horrors, and which keep us dangling over the gray void. How is it that we can defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these strings? The reason, one must suppose, is that nothing is more enticing, nothing more vitally idiotic, than our desire to have a name – even if it is the name of a stupid little puppet – and to hold on to this name throughout the long ordeal of our lives, as if we could hold on to it forever. If only we could keep those precious strings from growing frayed and tangled, if only we could keep from falling into an empty sky, we might continue to pass ourselves off under our assumed names and perpetuate our puppet's dance throughout all eternity.<sup>56</sup>

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56. T. Ligotti, 'A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing' in *In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land* (London: Durtro, 1997).

## ‘Memento Mori’ – Dead Monkeys

Oleg Kulik

12 b/w photographs, 1998.  
*Courtesy of XL Gallery, Moscow.*

## Thinking Horror<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Ligotti

### BEGINNINGS

For ages they had been without heads. Headless they lived, and headless they died. How long they had thus flourished none of them knew. Then something began to change. It happened over unremembered generations. The signs of a transfiguring were being writ ever more deeply into them. As their breed moved forward, they began crossing boundaries whose very existence they never suspected ... and they trembled. Some of them eyed their surroundings as they would a strange land into which they had wandered, even though their kind had trodden the same earth for countless seasons. And after nightfall, they looked up at a sky filled with stars and felt themselves small and fragile in the vastness. More and more, they came to know a new

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1. The present text is an extract from *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Short Life of Horror* (forthcoming), a work which binds together themes from pessimistic philosophy and the horror genre into an exposition on the uncanny nature and ontological fraudulence of the human species.

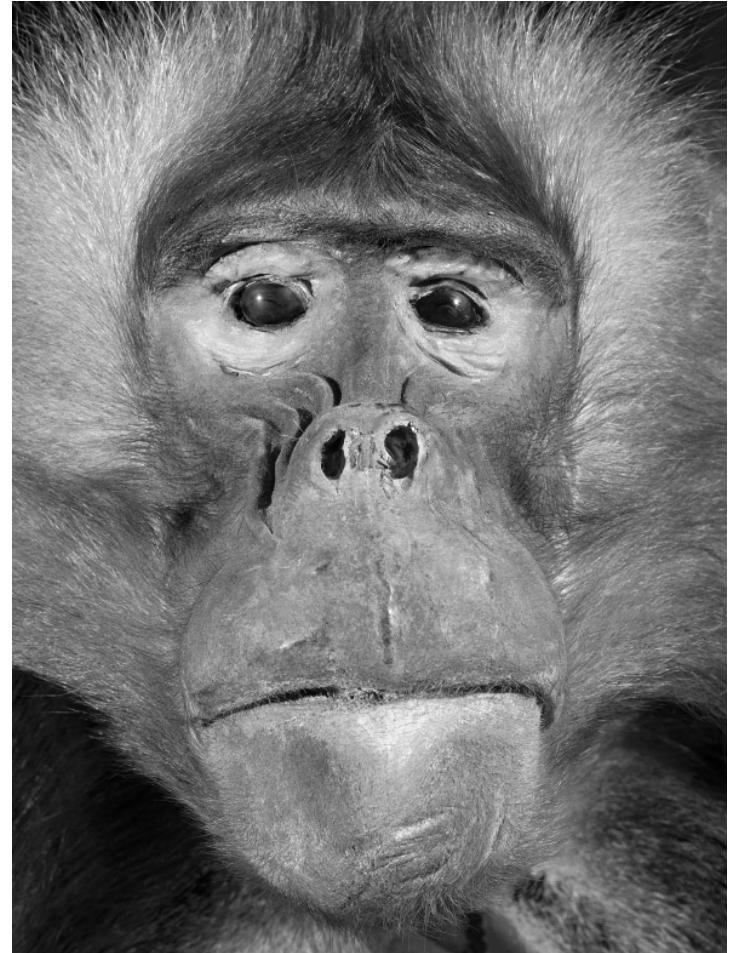
## COLLAPSE IV

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way of being. It was as if the objects around them were one thing and they were another. The world was moving farther and farther away, and they were at the center of this movement. Another world was forming inside the heads they now had. Each of them, in time, became frightened in a way they had never known. In former days, they were frightened only by sights and sounds in the moments they saw or heard them. Now they were frightened by things that were not present to their senses. They were also frightened by visions that came not from outside them but from within them. Everything had changed for their kind, and they could never return to what they once had been. The epoch had passed when they and the rest of creation were one and the same. They were beginning to know a world that did not know them. This is what they thought, and they thought it was not right. Something which *should not be* ... had become. And something had to be done if they were to flourish as they had before, if the very ground beneath their feet were not to fall out from under them. They could do nothing about the world which was moving farther and farther away and which knew them not. So something would have to be done about their heads.

### DIFFERENCES

For centuries a debate has been going on among us, a shadowy polemic that periodically attracts public notice. The issue: what do people think about being alive? Overwhelmingly, those questioned will say, 'Being alive is all right'. More thoughtful respondents will add, 'Especially when you consider the alternative', betraying a jocularity that is as logically puzzling as it is macabre, since the alternative is the first among certitudes that make being alive not



all right. These speakers weigh down one side of the survey. On the other side is a small sample in disagreement with the majority. Their response to the question of what they think about being alive will be a negative one. They may even fulminate about how objectionable it is to be alive. Now, there are really no incisive answers to why people think or feel this way or that. But one thing is sure: the people in the second group are pessimists. And in the minority opinion of pessimists, most of the people in this world have to work very hard to keep from thinking there is anything objectionable about being alive.

Lamentably, we cannot choose to think what we think or feel what we feel. If we did have this degree of mastery over our internal lives, then we would be spared an assortment of sufferings. Psychiatrists would be out of a job as depressives chose to stop being depressed and schizophrenics chose to stop being crazy. Most people, especially those who say that being alive is all right, do believe they have considerable choice in choosing what they think and feel. And psychiatrists, who will never be unemployed, seldom dissuade their clients from believing they can choose their thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, those who believe they can choose what they think and feel are incapable of *choosing what they choose* to think and feel. Should they still believe themselves in control of what they choose to choose to think and feel, they still could not choose to choose to choose . . . and so on. Were there any choice on our part regarding what we think and feel, it would not be adventurous to conjecture that we would think about pleasant things rather than horrible things and choose to feel good rather than bad. Some might even choose to think about nothing at all and to live in a permanent

state of euphoria until they died of natural causes. With godlike power over your thoughts and feelings, you could do as you choose. And who would choose to think horrible thoughts and feel bad feelings about being alive?

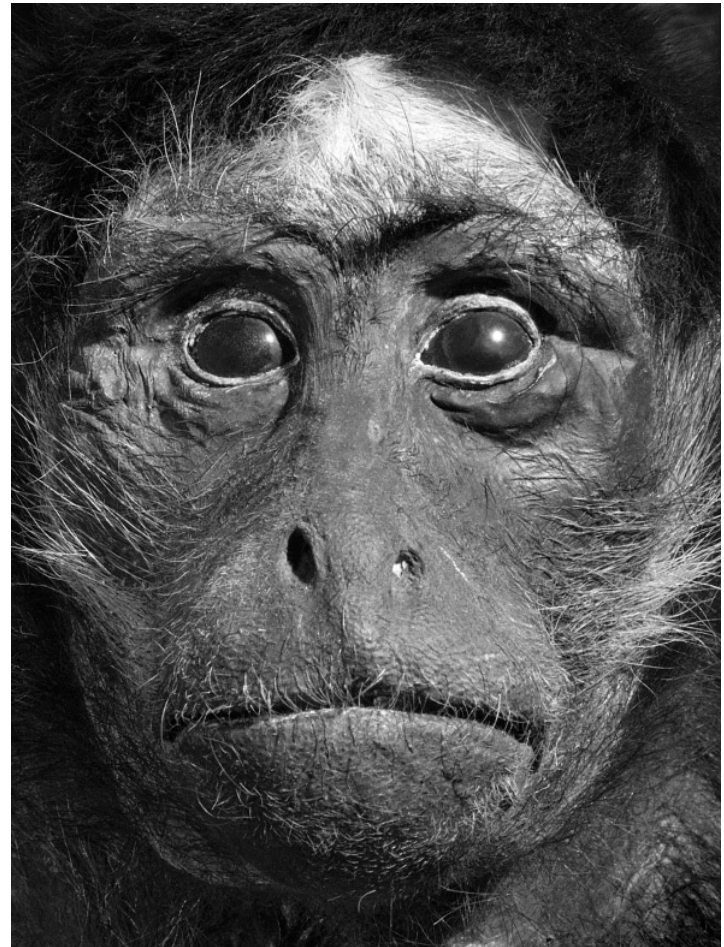
#### ZAPFFE

If the most contemplative individuals are sometimes dubious about the value of existence, they do not often publicize their doubts but align themselves with the man in the street, tacitly declaiming, in more erudite terms, 'Being alive is all right, etc'. The butcher, the baker, and the crushing majority of philosophers all agree on one thing: human life is justified, and we should keep our species going for as long as we can. To tout the opposing side is asking for grief. But some people seem born to bellyache that being alive is not all right. Should they vent this unpopular view in philosophical or literary works, they may do so without apprehension that their efforts will have an excess of admirers. Notable among such efforts is 'The Last Messiah' (1933), an essay written by the Norwegian philosopher and man of letters Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990). In this work, which has been twice translated into English,<sup>2</sup> Zapffe elucidated what he saw as the tragedy of human existence.

2. 'The Last Messiah', *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology* (Minneapolis: Minnesota U. Press, 1993), eds Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (translators Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed); *Philosophy Now*, March-April 2004 (translator Gisle R. Tangenes). Regrettably, Zapffe's philosophical masterwork, *On the Tragic* (1941), has not appeared in any major language at the time of this writing. However, abstracts of its substance, as well as excerpts from this treatise and other writings by Zapffe as translated into English by Tangenes, confirm that throughout his long life he did not abandon or dilute the pessimistic principles of *On the Tragic* as they appear in miniature in 'The Last Messiah'.

## COLLAPSE IV

Before discussing why Zapffe saw human existence as a tragedy, it may be useful to consider a few facts whose relevance will become manifest down the line. As some may know, there exist readers who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence, hyperbolically speaking. Cynical by nature, these persons are well aware that nothing indispensable to their existence, hyperbolically or literally speaking, must make its way into their lives, as if by natural birthright. They do not think that anything indispensable to anyone's existence may be claimed as a natural birthright, since the birthrights we commonly bandy about are all fictions, something we dreamed up after straying from a factual world into one fabricated by our heads. For those who have given any thought to this matter, the only rights we may exercise are these: to seek the survival of our individual bodies, to create more bodies like our own, and to perish through a process of corruption or mortal trauma. This is presuming that one has been brought to term and has survived to a certain age, neither being a natural birthright. Stringently considered, *our only natural birthright is to die*. No other rights have been allocated to us except, to repeat, as fabrications. The divine right of kings may now be acknowledged as a fabrication, a falsified permit for prideful dementia and impulsive mayhem. The unalienable rights of certain people, however, seemingly remain current: whether observed or violated, somehow we believe they are not fabrications because an old document says they are real. Miserly or munificent as a given right may appear, it denotes no more than the right of way warranted by a traffic light, which does not mean you have the right to drive free of vehicular misadventures. Ask any paramedic.



Our want of any natural birthright – except to die, in most cases without assistance – is not a matter of tragedy but only one of truth. Coming at last to the pith of Zapffe's thought as spelled out in 'The Last Messiah', the tragedy of human existence had its beginnings when at some stage in our evolution we somehow acquired consciousness. Zapffe believed consciousness to be a mistake in human evolution, an adventitious outgrowth that made of us a race of monsters – things that had nothing to do with the rest of creation. Because of consciousness, we became susceptible to thoughts that were startling and dreadful to us. ('I think, therefore I am and will one day die', or thus might have read René Descartes' formulation had he gone the whole mile with it). Our heads now began dredging up horrors, flagrantly joyless possibilities, enough of them to make us drop to the ground in paroxysms of self-soiling consternation should they go untrammelled. This potentiality necessitated that certain defense mechanisms be put to use to keep us balanced on the knife-edge of vitality as a species. While a modicum of consciousness may have had survivalist properties during an immemorial chapter of our evolution, further escalations of this faculty appeared to be maladaptive, turning our awareness into a seditious agent working against us. As the Norwegian philosopher concluded, along with others before and after him, we must hamper our consciousness for all we are worth or it will impose upon us a too clear vision of the 'great matter of birth and death', to borrow a phrase from Zen Buddhism. Thus, each of us became a paradox: we could not live with ourselves as we were and we could not live otherwise. We could only keep the horror in its box.

For the rest of the earth's organisms, existence is relatively uncomplicated. Their lives are about three things: survival, reproduction, death – and nothing else. But we know too much to content ourselves with surviving, reproducing, dying – and nothing else. We know we are alive and know we will die. We also know we will suffer at intervals throughout our lives before suffering – slowly or quickly – at the point of death. This is the knowledge we 'enjoy' as the most intelligent organisms to gush from the womb of nature. And as such, we feel shortchanged if there is nothing more for us than to survive, reproduce, and die. We want there to be more to it than that, or to think there is. This is the tragedy: consciousness has forced us into striving to be something other than what we are – hunks of spoiling flesh on hardening bones. For other organisms, life is a well-managed ramble toward their demise. But we are susceptible to startling and dreadful thoughts, and we need some fabulous illusions to take our minds off them. For us, then, life is a con game we must run on ourselves, hoping we do not catch on to any monkey business that would leave us stripped of our defense mechanisms and standing bare-assed before the silent, staring void. To end this self-deception, to free our species from this backbreaking labor of lies, we must cease reproducing. Nothing less will do, per Zapffe, although in 'The Last Messiah' the character after whom the essay is named does all the talking about human extinction. Elsewhere Zapffe speaks for himself on the subject.

More audacious than it is astonishing, Zapffe's thought has a substructure in existential psychology and sociology rather than in metaphysics, analytics, or hard science. It is penetrable and ineluctably dismal, resting on taboo

commonplaces and outlawed truisms while eschewing the arcane brain-twisters that for thousands of years have been philosophy's stock-in-trade. *The World as Will and Representation* (two volumes, 1819 and 1844) by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer is perhaps the most handsome metaphysical system ever elaborated, which does not mean that the Will-to-live as the causal agent for everything that moves is not just an overwrought floorshow for brainiacs. But Zapffe's principles are crystalline and therefore could never interest professors or practitioners of philosophy, who prefer to circle around grand exhibitions of theory wherein harsh realities and reeling senselessness are secreted behind elegant explications of what our lives are really about. If we must think, it should be done only in circles, outside of which lies the unthinkable.

#### MASTERMINDING

Zapffe's two central propositions as adumbrated above are as follows. The first is that consciousness has overreached the point of being a sufferable property of our species, and thus we thwart it in four principal ways.

(1) **ISOLATION.** So that we may get on with living without going into a free fall of trepidation, we isolate the dire facts of being alive. These are stowed away in a remote compartment of our minds. They are the family freaks in the attic whose existence we deny in a conspiracy of silence.

(2) **ANCHORING.** To stabilize our lives in the tempestuous waters of chaos, we conspire to anchor them in metaphysical and institutional 'verities' – God, Morality, Natural Law, Country, Family – that imbue us with a sense of being official, authentic, and safe in our beds.

(3) **DISTRACTION.** To keep our heads unreflective of a world of horrors, we distract them with the worst trash or the best trash. The most operant and elementary method for furthering the conspiracy, distraction is in continuous employ and demands only that everyone keep their eyes on the ball – or television screen or great book.

(4) **SUBLIMATION.** That we might annul a paralyzing stage fright having to do with the nightmare intervals of being alive, we sublimate our fears by making an open display of them. In the Zapffian sense, sublimation is the rarest technique utilized for conspiring against the human race. Putting into play both deviousness and skill, this is the process by which thinkers and artistic types recycle the most demoralizing and unnerving aspects of life as works in which the worst fortunes of humanity are presented in a stylized and removed manner as entertainment. In so many words, these thinkers and artistic types confect products that provide an escape from our suffering by a bogus simulation of it – a tragic drama or philosophical woolgathering, for instance. Zapffe uses 'The Last Messiah' to showcase how a literary-philosophical opus cannot perturb its creator or anyone else with the severity of true-to-life horrors, but only provide a pale representation of these horrors, just as a movie whose centerpiece is the romance of two young people, one of whom dies of leukemia, cannot rend its audience with the throes of the real thing, even if it may produce an award-winning tearjerker, as in the case of the 1971 film adaptation of Erich Segal's 1970 bestselling novel *Love Story*.

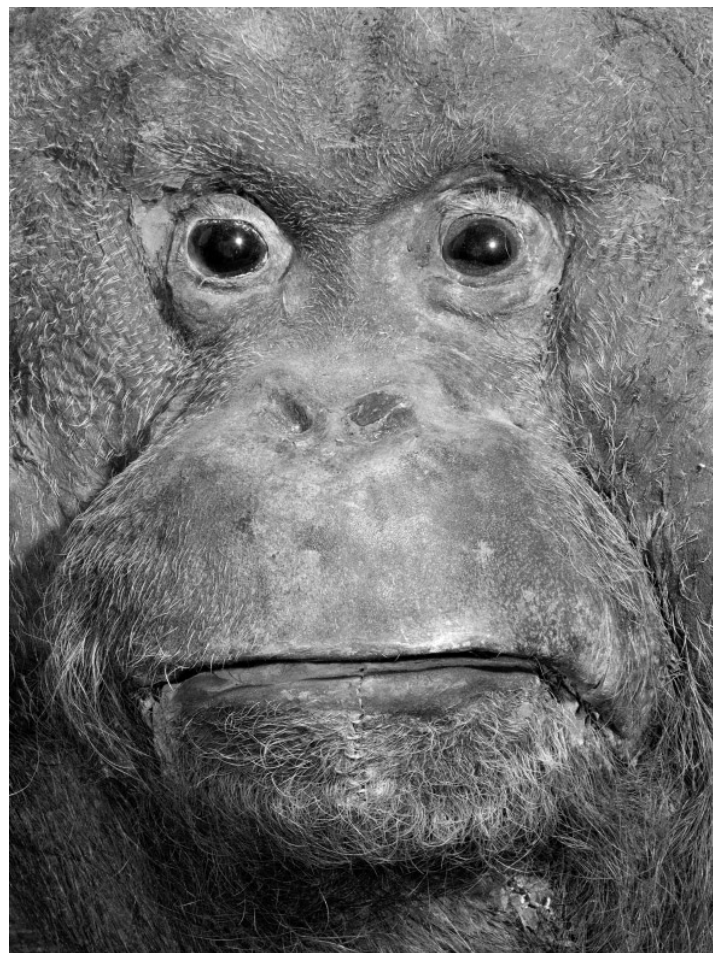
By cleaving to these stratagems, we keep ourselves from scrutinizing too closely the smorgasbord of pain and fear laid out for us by life.

## COLLAPSE IV

The second of Zapffe's two central propositions – that our species should refrain from reproducing – brings to mind a familiar cast of characters. The Gnostic sect of the Cathari in twelfth-century France were so tenacious in believing the world to be an evil place engendered by an evil deity that its members were offered a dual ultimatum: sexual abstinence or sodomy. (A similar sect in Bulgaria, the Bogomils, became the etymological origin of the term 'buggery' for their practice of this form of erotic release). Around the same period, the Catholic Church mandated abstinence for its clerics, a directive that did not halt them from betimes giving in to sexual quickening. Most sadly, the *raison d'être* for this doctrine was the attainment of grace (and in legend was obligatory for those in search of the Holy Grail) rather than an enlightened governance of reproductive plugs and bungholes. Lusting to empower itself, the Church slacked off from the example of its ascetic founder in order to breed a copious body of followers and rule as much of the earth as it could.

In another orbit from the theologies of either Gnosticism or Catholicism, the nineteenth-century German philosopher Philipp Mainländer (pseudonym of Phillip Batz) advocated chastity as the surest blueprint for salvation. The target point of his redemptive plan was the summoning within ourselves of a 'Will-to-die'. This brainstorm, along with others as gripping, was advanced by Mainländer in a treatise whose title has been translated as *The Philosophy of Redemption*.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the work itself has not been translated into English. Perhaps the author might have known greater celebrity if, like the Austrian philosopher

3. *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (Berlin: Theodor Hofmann, 1879 [second edition]) and *Die philosophie der Erlösung: Zwölf philosophische* (Frankfurt am Main: C. Kötner, 1882-6 [five volumes])



Otto Weininger in his infamous study translated as *Sex and Character* (1903), he had ruminated more *about* the venereal goad rather than *against* it. Mainländer also made the cardinal error of pressing his readers to work for such ends as justice and charity for all. An unbridled visionary, although not of the inspirational sort that receives a charitable hearing from posterity, he shot himself in the foot every chance he got before aiming the gun a little higher and ending his life. This act was consummated the day of the publication of *The Philosophy of Redemption*. To the end, Mainländer avouched his personal sense of well-being and proposed universal suicide for a most esoteric reason (see under the section ‘Decide’ below).

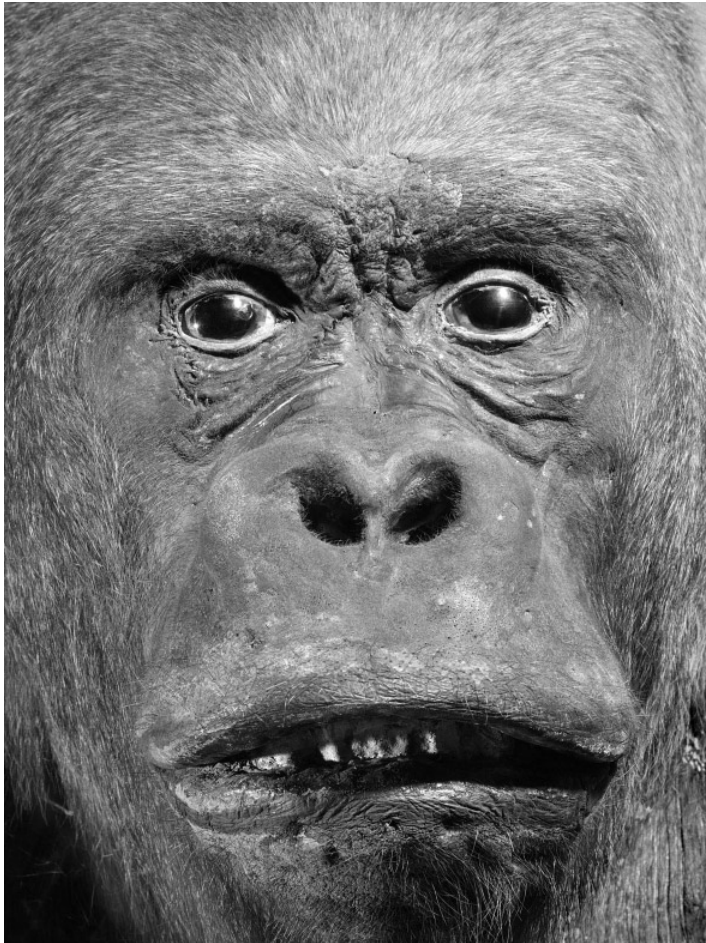
A less composed figure than Mainländer was the Italian philosopher Carlo Michelstaedter. In his 1910 doctoral dissertation, published in English as *Persuasion and Rhetoric*<sup>4</sup>, the twenty-three-year-old Michelstaedter critiqued, as later would Zapffe, the tactics we use to falsify the realities of human existence in exchange for a speciously comforting view of our lives. Michelstaedter’s biographers and critics have speculated that his despair of any person’s ability to break through their web of illusions was the cause of his suicide (two bullets from a gun) the day after he finished his dissertation. What seems to have finished Michelstaedter was a stellar fact of human life that he could not accept: no one has control over how they will be in this world, a truth that eradicates all hope if how you want to be is invulnerably self-possessed (‘persuaded’) and without subjection to a life that would fit you within the limits of its unrealities (‘rhetoric’, a word oddly used by Michelstaedter).

4. Trans. R. S. Valentino, C. S. Blum, and D. J. Depew. New Haven, Conn./London: Yale University Press, 2004.

But individuals are defined by their limitations; without them, we fall outside the barrier of identifiable units, functionaries in the big show of collective existence. The farther you proceed toward a vision of humankind under the aspect of eternity, the farther you drift from what makes you a person among persons in this world. In the observance of Zapffe, an overactive consciousness endangers the approving way in which we define ourselves and our lives. It does this by threatening our self-limited perception of who we are and by blackmailing us with unsavoury facts about what it means to know we are alive and will die. A person’s demarcations as a being, not how far he trespasses those limits, create his identity and preserve his illusion of being someone. Transcending all illusions and their emergent activities would untether us from ourselves and license the freedom to be no one. In that event, we would lose our allegiance to our species, stop reproducing, and quietly bring about our own end. The lesson: ‘Let us love our limitations, for without them nobody would be left to be somebody.’

While recognizing the nuisance of conscious existence, not all are as unrelenting in their pessimism as Zapffe. In his 1913 *Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*,<sup>5</sup> the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno speaks of consciousness as a disease bred by a conflict between the rational and the irrational. The rational is identified with the conclusions of consciousness, primarily that we will all die. The irrational represents all that is vital in humanity, including a universal desire for immortality. The coexistence of the rational and the irrational turns the human experience into a wrangle of contradictions to which we can submit

5. Republished, trans. A. Kerrigan, Princeton University Press, 1978



with a suicidal resignation or obstinately defy as heroes of futility. Unamuno's penchant is for the heroic course, with the implied precondition that one has the physical and psychological spunk for the fight: 'I think, therefore I know that life is a meaningless bitch and then I will die; but I cannot let that keep me from living in defiance of what I know, which is what everyone does, pessimist or not.' In line with Unamuno, Joshua Foa Dienstag, author of *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*,<sup>6</sup> also gives the thumbs-up to the pessimist-as-hero – one who is aware of the dispiriting lowdown on life and yet marches on. Also siding with this never-say-die group is William R. Brashear, whose *The Desolation of Reality*<sup>7</sup> concludes with a format for redemption, however partial and imperfect, by means of what he calls 'tragic humanism', which recognizes human life's 'ostensible insignificance, but also the necessity of proceeding as if this were not so, and of willfully nourishing and sustaining the underlying illusions of value and order'. Not exactly pessimists in the tradition of Schopenhauer or Zapffe, Unamuno, Dienstag, and Brashear are at least vocal about what is at stake for those who know they are alive and will die.

#### MEANINGFULNESS

Among the unpleasantries of life that lie in wait is the abashment some persons suffer because they feel their lives are destitute of meaning. The sense that one's life has meaning is sometimes declared to be a necessary condition for developing or maintaining a state of good feeling. This is horrendous news considering the mind-boggling number

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6. Princeton University Press, 2006.

7. NY: Peter Lang, 1995.

of books and therapies for a market of discontented individuals who are short on a sense of meaning, either in a limited and localized variant ('I received an A on my calculus exam') or one that is macrocosmic in scope ('There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet'). Those who are euphoric, or even moderately content, are not parched for meaning. Relatively speaking, feeling good is its own justification. As long as such states last, why louse up a good thing with self-searching interrogations about meaning? But an abnormal degree of elation could also be a sign of psychopathology, as it is for individuals who have been diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder. Such persons should be treated by mental health professionals, although psycho-behavioral therapeutics often puts a patient in the clutches of mind healers who are modern-day incarnations of positive-thinking preachers such as Norman Vincent Peale. No one ever bought a copy of *The Power of Positive Thinking*<sup>8</sup> who was not dissatisfied with his or her life. This dissatisfaction is precisely the quality that the great pessimists – Buddha, Schopenhauer, Freud – saw as definitive of the human packing plant. Millions of copies of Peale's book and its reiterations, including Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*,<sup>9</sup> have been sold. And they were not purchased by readers who were madly content with their place on the ladder of subjective well being, in the vernacular of 'positive psychology'. Neither have they been documented as hoisting themselves toward 'lasting' fulfillment by reading the books of these gurus of happiness.<sup>10</sup>

8. NY: Prentice Hall, 1952.

9. London: Nicholas Brearley, 2003.

10. For a study based on clinical research that documents one's subjective wellbeing

While every other creature in the world is insensate to meaning, those of us on the high ground of evolution are full of this enigmatic hankering, a preoccupation that any comprehensive encyclopedia of philosophy treats under the heading LIFE, THE MEANING OF. We have a need that is not natural, one that can never be satisfied no matter how many big lies we swallow. Our unparalleled craving may be appeased – like the yen of a dope fiend – but we are deceived if we think it is ever gone for good. Years may pass during which we are unmolested by LIFE, THE MEANING OF. Some days we wake up and just say, 'It's good to be alive'. If everyone were in such elevated spirits all the time, the topic of LIFE, THE MEANING OF would never rise up in our heads or our conversations. But this ungrounded jubilation soon runs out of steam. Our consciousness, having snoozed awhile in the garden of incuriosity, is pricked by some thorn or other, perhaps DEATH, THE MEANING OF. Then the hunger returns for LIFE, THE MEANING OF, the emptiness must be filled again, the pursuit is resumed. And we will keep chasing after the impossible until we are no more. This is the tragedy that we do our best to cover up in order to brave an existence that holds terrors for us at every turn, with little but blind faith and habit to keep us on the move.

## HUMANNESS

As heretofore posited, consciousness may have facilitated our species' survival in the hard times of prehistory, but as it became evermore acute it evolved the potential to ruin everything if not securely muzzled. This is the problem: we

as a genetically determined lottery and not something that a self-help book can instruct an individual to achieve, see 'Happiness Is a Stochastic Phenomenon' by David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, *University of Minnesota Psychological Science*, 1996. Believe it or not.

must either outsmart consciousness or be thrown into its vortex of doleful factuality and suffer, as Zapffe dubbed it, a 'dread of being' – not only of our own being but of being itself. On the strength of this premise, Zapffe inferred that the sensible thing to do would be to call off all procreative activities. Not only would it be the sensible thing to do, but it might be the most telling indication, even the *only* indication, of what it means to be human. This could settle some old questions. Is the condition of being human what we think it is? And what do we think it is to be human? Nowhere in philosophy or the arts are there answers on which we can all agree. Science has us down as a species of organic life. But whatever it means to be human, we can at least say that we have consciousness – an attribute that has made us the royalty of creation, yet one that we cannot let get out of hand if we are to survive. Question: why would we want to survive as a species caught in this double bind? Answer: because we do not know what it is to be human.

To repeat what cannot be repeated enough: we can tolerate existence only if we believe – in accord with a complex of illusions, a legerdemain of deception – that we are not what we are: unreality on legs. As creatures with consciousness, we must suppress that divulgement lest it break us with a sense of being things without significance or foundation, anatomies shackled to a landscape of pointless horrors. In plain language, we cannot live with ourselves except as impostors, paradoxical beings who must lie to ourselves about ourselves, as well as about our no-win situation in this world. Thus, we are zealots of Zapffe's four consciousness-smothering strategies: isolation ('Being alive is all right'), anchoring ('One Nation under God with Families, Morality, and Natural Laws for all'), distraction

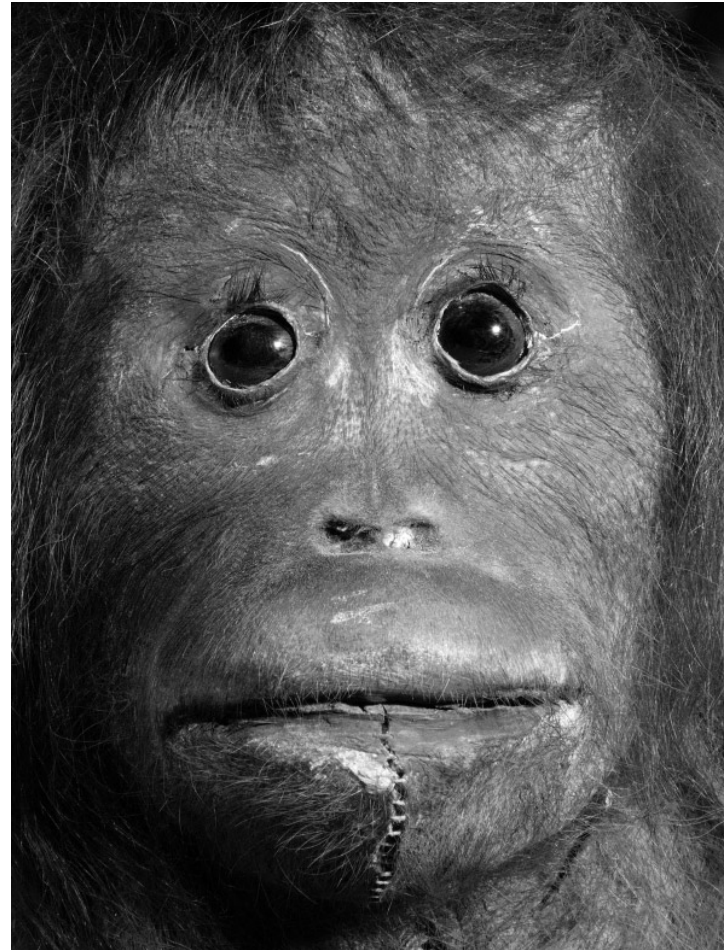
('Better to kill time than kill oneself'), and sublimation ('I am writing a book entitled *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*'). These practices make us what we are – beings with a nimble intellect who can deceive themselves 'for their own good'. Isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation are the wiles we use to keep our heads from dispelling every illusion that keeps us up and running. ('We think, therefore we know we are alive and will one day die; so we had better stop thinking, except in circles.') Without this cognitive double-dealing, our world would be seen for what it is – something that is not very good to see, something that everyone glimpses from time to time and then looks away because they do not want to see too much of it. Maybe if we could resolutely gaze wide-eyed at our lives we would know what it is to be human. But that would stop the puppet show that we like to think will run forever.

In 'The Last Messiah', Zapffe wrote: 'The whole of living that we see before our eyes today is from inmost to outmost enmeshed in repressional mechanisms, social and individual; they can be traced right into the tritest formulas of everyday life.'<sup>11</sup> The four formulas that Zapffe picked out as individual and social mechanisms of repression are probably the most trite he could have chosen, which may have been deliberate on his part because they are so familiar to us and so visible in human affairs. No one hesitates to admit them. Not overweight persons or tobacco users, who will promptly admit to playing dumb when they are scarfing down a cupcake or smoking a cigarette. Not soldiers fighting a war, who will proudly admit they are risking their lives and limbs for a good greater than

11. Translation by Gisle R. Tøngenes, op. cit.

## COLLAPSE IV

themselves – their families, their country, their god. Not anyone who is going to die soon, who will not voluntarily admit to playing the same old games for as long as possible rather than be consumed by thoughts of mortality and the agony that may precede it. Not artists, who with a shrug will admit to keeping their aesthetic distance for fear of being hamstrung by the realities they instantiate (musicians practice distraction rather than artistic sublimation). Such repressional mechanisms have been well analyzed by professional thinkers, particularly in relation to the fear of death. (For an enumeration of these and other mechanisms for grappling with thanatophobia, see *Choices for Living: Coping with the Fear of Dying*<sup>12</sup> by Thomas S. Langer). For almost all philosophers who write on the subject, death is studied in the abstract, while the more messy truths attending it are either bracketed or cold-shouldered. Death, of course, is only a sub-category of suffering, which, if it is even recognized by philosophers, is not something they care to brood upon. Suffering cannot be studied in the abstract. Philosophically, there is not much that can be done with it, and those few who try will be arraigned for talking nonsense. Almost all philosophers balk at saying anything about SUFFERING, THE MEANING OF. But none of them hesitate to admit that they, in league with everyone else, employ repressional mechanisms in their lives. And what use are repressional mechanisms if not to avoid discussions about suffering?



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12. NY/London: Kluwer, 2002.

## SUFFERING

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*,<sup>13</sup> Karl Popper expounded a new slant on human suffering. Briefly, he revamped the Utilitarianism of the nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who wrote, 'Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness'. Popper remolded this summation of a positive Utilitarianism into a *negative* Utilitarianism whose position he handily stated as follows: 'It adds to clarity in the fields of ethics, if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness.' Taken to its logical and most humanitarian conclusion, Popper's demand can have as its only end the elimination of those who now suffer and those who will suffer if they are born. What else could the 'elimination of suffering' mean if not its total abolition, and ours? Naturally, Popper held his horses well before suggesting that to eliminate suffering would demand that we as a species be eliminated. But he should still be applauded for promoting the basics of a school of thought that would prefer to eliminate suffering – or at least tone it down – than to promote happiness in human life.

Other philosophies of a similar type as Negative Utilitarianism are Abolitionism and Algonomy. The people behind these incipient movements are fiery battlers against a world that is effectively indifferent to human suffering, which they have situated as the only problem with being alive. Abolitionism has gone so far as to preach that not only should human beings be emancipated from suffering, they should also know what it is like to feel unbroken bliss throughout their lives and no mental or physical

inconvenience upon their deaths – a Utilitarianism beyond positivity or negativity. While no safe and efficient means yet exists to reach this peak existence, the parent figure of Abolitionism, the British philosopher David Pearce, has encyclopedically catalogued the ameliorations for suffering that now exist and has brilliantly outlined what steps we should presently be taking toward a life of engineered happiness. Nevertheless, an Abolitionist life would still not be perfect, since painful fatalities caused by accidents and natural disasters can never be gotten around. And such a life would be as useless as any other. That having been said, the existence that Pearce wants for the human race would at least not be malignant through and through, since it would turn the suffering with which we are drenched into a shower of (mostly) pleasurable sensations.

In 'The Last Messiah', Zapffe is not sanguine about eliminating suffering, nor is he so unworldly as to beseech a communal solution for its elimination by snuffing out the human race, as did the Cathari and the Bogomils. (He does critique the barbarism of social or religious proscriptions of suicide, but he is not a standard-bearer for this form of personal salvation). Zapffe's thought is foremost an addendum to that of various sects and individuals who have found human existence to be so unquestionably awful that extinction is preferable to survival. It also has the value of advancing a new answer to the old question 'Why should generations unborn be spared entry into the human threshers?' But what might be called 'Zapffe's Paradox', in the tradition of possessively named formulations that saturate primers of philosophy, is as useless as the propositions of any other thinker who is pro-life or anti-life or is only juggling concepts to clinch what is reality and can we ever

13. London: Routledge, 1945.



get there. Having said as much, we can continue as if it had not been said. The value of a philosopher's thought is not in its answers – no philosopher has any that are more helpful than saying nothing at all – but in how well they speak to the prejudgments of their consumers. Such is the importance – and the nullity – of rhetoric. Ask any hard-line pessimist, but do not expect him to expect you to take his words seriously.

The greatest strike against philosophical pessimism is that its only theme is human suffering. This is the last item on the list of our species' preoccupations and detracts from everything of any importance to us, such as the Good, the Beautiful, and tomorrow's weather. Cures may be discovered for certain diseases and sociopolitical barbarities may be amended, but these are only stopgaps. Human suffering is insoluble as long as human beings exist. The one truly effective solution for suffering is that spoken of in Zapffe's 'Last Messiah'. It may not be a realistic solution for a stopgap world, but it is one that would forever put an end to suffering, should we ever care to do so. The pessimist's credo, or one of them, is that nonexistence never hurt anyone and that conscious existence hurts everyone. (Uneasy indeed are the heads that wear the crown of pain; suffering, however, would not disturb us.

The twentieth-century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said or wrote, 'I don't know why we are here, but I'm pretty sure it is not in order to enjoy ourselves'. But Wittgenstein's uncertain determination does not go to the heart of human existence. Hedonism is irrelevant as a justification for our lives. No price is too high for our creaturely reward of just being here and knowing

that others will be here after us. This is our 'pleasure', and no amount of suffering will lead our species to question it. While this pleasure began as a relief from the anxieties of genealogical slippage, it now stems in the main from psychological satisfactions. The modern family unit is an indulgence, not a necessity. It is a satisfaction of the ego or an appurtenance of one's public image. Children are not economic insurance for their families but consumer goods, personal accessories, trinkets or tie-clips. No longer their parents' *employees*, as in earlier days, they strike out on their own and go into business for themselves when sufficient capital has been accumulated or may be borrowed – life on the installment plan.

But if the price of suffering has fallen – not that it was ever unaffordable – we still must deal with a progressively insidious consciousness, that invader of our homes and heads. Zapffe's achievement as a pessimist treads beyond complaints of how rich with suffering life can be. We – as genetic donors consorting two by two for the protraction of our species – have no problem with suffering. The problem for us – as billions of lone individuals who mingle but can never merge with one another – is the pyrotechnics of cogitation we must perform to stave off our consciousness of pain, of death, of life as a danse macabre into which we are always pulling new partners and lying to them as we lie to ourselves.

Our success as a survival-happy species is calculated in the number of years we have extended our lives, with the reduction of suffering being only incidental to this aim. The lifespan of non-domesticated mammals has never changed, while ours has grown by leaps and bounds. What a coup for us. Unaware of the length of their stay on earth, other

warm-blooded life forms are sluggards by comparison. Without consciousness of death, we would not frantically rouse ourselves to lengthen our mortal tenure. And how we have cashed in on our efforts: no need to cram our lives into three decades now that we can cram them into seven, eight, nine, or more. Time will run out for us as it does for all creatures, true, but at least we can dream of a day when we might *choose* our own deadline. Then everyone could die of the same thing: satiation with a durability that is *MALIGNANTLY USELESS*. Without a terminus for the journey of our lives, their uselessness would become excruciatingly overt. Knowing ourselves to be on a collision course with the Black Wall of Death may be a horror, but it is the only thing that makes it possible to value that which comes before, if we are not too cast down by thoughts of our mortality to do so. While this quid pro quo may be a bad value, without it there is no value. Only a terminal point, only *endness*, can make the present seem precious, although the here-and-now is almost invariably taken for granted so that we can squander what little time we have by looking cockeyed to the future. It is in the future that we expect to inherit a greater value than that which trickles backwards into our lives from their certain end. But as everyone knows, even though we disregard this knowledge, the future is only the present in disguise, and as soon as it arrives we begin hunting for *another* future. Not until the future is behind us can there be any peace on this earth or in our heads. If only we could end our arduous voyage to a fool's future, Zapffe's prospectus for our self-extermination would be a walk in the park. At all levels, the systems of life – from sociopolitical systems to solar systems – are repugnant and should be negated as *MALIGNANTLY USELESS*.

‘Worthless’ rather than ‘useless’ is the more familiar epithet in this context. The motive for using ‘useless’ in place of ‘worthless’ in this histrionically capitalized phrase is that ‘worthless’ is tied to the concepts of desirability and value, and by their depreciation introduces them into the mix. ‘Useless’, on the other hand, is not so inviting of these concepts. ‘Worthless’ can serviceably be connected to the language of pessimism and does what damage it can. But the devil of it is that ‘worthless’ really does not go far enough when speaking pessimistically about the character of existence. Too many times the question ‘Is life worth living?’ has been asked. This usage of ‘worth’ excites impressions of a fair lot of experiences that are arguably desirable and valuable within limits and that follow upon one another in such a way as to suggest that life is not worthless overall, or not so worthless that a case could not be made for its worth. With ‘useless’, the spirits of desirability and value do not as readily rear their heads, and existence as dizzying pointlessness state of affairs may be more intemperately asserted. Naturally, the uselessness of all that is or could be may be repudiated as well or badly the worthlessness of all that is or could be. For this reason, the adverb ‘malignantly’ has been annexed to ‘useless’ to give it a little more semantic stretch, if not enough to deter any rebuttals from the opposition. But to express with any adequacy a sense of the sucking uselessness of everything, a nonlinguistic modality would be needed, some effusion out of a dream that coalesced every nuance of the useless and wordlessly transmitted to us the inanity of any possible thing, conception, or condition. Indigent of such means of communication, the uselessness of all that exists or possibly could exist must be spoken with a poor potency.



Of course, everyone believes there are things, conceptions, and conditions that are not useless. We all live within relative frameworks where something may not be useless – in a practical way – with respect to something else. A potato masher is not useless if one wants to mash potatoes. For some people, a system of being that includes a god may not seem useless, possibly because it involves concepts such as eternity and infinity. Yet even something that involves concepts such as eternity and infinity is not saved from being useless except within a relative framework of what is not eternal or infinite. It would then not be useless only in the same relative capacity as a potato masher. As long as there are entities that are relative to one another, they will be potato-masher entities. And if there were a god that had no relation to anything that was not that god – that was not relative to anything because nothing else existed – then such a thing would be the paradigm of uselessness, being that there would be nothing for which it could not be useless. Should that god drum up a universe in which there were things for which it would not be useless, it could only be a potato-masher god. Far more likely in the minds of many people is that the universe was drummed up without a god, thereby making the uselessness of that universe, except in the potato-masher relations of its part, unbelievably evident. Some people do not get up in arms about the relativity of everything; others do. The latter want to worship gods that are not just potato-masher gods or to think in terms of absolutes that are really absolute and not just absolute potato-mashers. They cannot accept an existence in which everything is **MALIGNANTLY USELESS** except as some species of potato masher. They particularly do not like to think that they themselves are potato-masher things living potato-masher lives in a potato-masher world.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims have a real problem with a potato-masher world. Buddhists have no problem with it because for them the way to salvation is to realize the truth of ‘dependent origination’, which means that everything is related to everything else in a great network of potato mashers that are always interacting with one another. So the only problem Buddhists have is not being able to realize that everything is a great network of potato mashers. They think that if they could get over this hump, then they would be forever liberated from suffering. In the Buddhist faith, everyone suffers who cannot see that the world is a **MALIGNANTLY USELESS** potato-mashing network. Contrary to Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Buddhists do not have the handicap of believing in a god or even in their own reality, although they do have other handicaps.

#### DISCONTENT

Being royally conscious of the solemn precincts in which we exist, of the savage wasteland and sordid burlesque that lies beneath life’s piddling nonsense, would turn us to dust. Saddled with self-knowledge, we thrive only insofar as we vigilantly obfuscate our heads with every baseless belief or frivolous recreation at our disposal. But as much as our heads are inclined to clog themselves with such trash, a full-scale blockage is impossible. This impossibility makes us heirs to a legacy of discontent. In his study *Suicide* (1897), the French sociologist Emile Durkheim contended that ‘one does not advance when one proceeds toward no goal, or – which is the same thing – when the goal is infinity. To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness’. Who can gainsay that the goal of our race has no visible horizon

and therefore, in Durkheim's view, we are doomed, as the French thinker rather euphemistically put it, to 'a state of perpetual unhappiness'? Along similar lines, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes in his *Darwin's Worms: On Life Stories and Death Stories*:<sup>14</sup> 'Tyrannical fantasies of our own perfectibility lurk in even our simplest ideals, Darwin and Freud intimate, so that any ideal can become another excuse for punishment. Lives dominated by impossible ideals, complete honesty, absolute knowledge, perfect happiness, eternal love are experienced as continuous failures.' (Phillips' twist of mind may be seen as self-serving due to his belief in psychoanalysis, which by its nature is not designed to make people happy on a tight schedule, or to make them happy at all). To counter these glum assessments of things, the world's religions all offer goals that they say are very much attainable, if only in the afterlife or the next life.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), existentialist superstar Albert Camus represents the unattainable goal of the title figure as an apologetic for going on with life rather than ending it. As Camus insisted in his discussion of this gruesome parable, 'We must imagine Sisyphus as happy.' The credo of the Church Father Tertullian, 'I believe because it is absurd', might as rightly be attributed to Camus. Caught between the fabrications of the Carthaginian and the rationalizations of the Frenchman, Zapffe's proposal that we put out the light of the human race extends to us a solution to our troubles that is infinitely more satisfying than that of either Tertullian or his modern avatar Camus, who considered suicide as a philosophical issue for the individual yet, by some oversight, did not entertain the advantages of an all-out attrition of the species. Aside from

14. London: Faber, 1999.

a repertoire of tricks we can do that other animals cannot, the truest indicator of a human being is unhappiness. The main fount of that unhappiness, as Zapffe and others have written, is our consciousness. And the more dilated consciousness becomes, the more unhappy the human. In the end, Camus' injunction that we *must* imagine Sisyphus as happy is as unavailing as it is feculent.

On the subject of whether or not life is worth the trouble, the answer must always be unambivalent . . . and positive. To teeter the least bit into the negative is tantamount to moral suicide. If you value your values, no doubts about this matter can be raised, unless they occur as a lead-up to some determinate affirmation. In the products of high or low culture, philosophical disquisitions, and arid chitchat, the anthem of life *must* forever roar above the squeaks of dissent and *must* be delivered to us without abatement or appreciable contradiction. We were all born into a rollicking game that has been too long in progress to allow a substantive change in the rules. Should the incessant fanfare that meets your ears day in and day out sound out of tune and horribly inappropriate, you will be branded *persona non grata* and welcome wagons will not stop at your door. So if you know what is best for you and want a good seat from which to watch human existence as it goes by, you must *not* recognize Zapffe's proposal for the salvation-by-extinction of the human race as a solution to the absurdity of life.

Those who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence are hopelessly frustrated with living in a world on autopilot when they would like to switch it over to manual consciousness and nosedive humanity into a crash without survivors. On the flip side, most ordinary



people can live with discontent because it is concomitant with their expectation that humanity will forever ‘survive’ (Middle English by way of Middle French from the Latin *supervivere* – to outlive or live beyond). Bulletin: we, as a subcategory of the *mélange* of earth’s organisms, may outlive other species, but we will not live beyond our own time of extinction, as over ninety-nine percent of preceding life forms on this planet have not lived beyond theirs. We can pretend this will not happen, fantasizing super-scientific eternities, but in good time we will be taken out of the scene. This turn of events will be the defeat of Project Immortality, which has been in the works for millennia.

#### MISTAKE

Consciousness is an existential liability, as every pessimist agrees. It is also a mistake that has taken humankind down a black hole of logic: to make it through this life, we must pretend that we are what we are not, according to Zapffe’s Paradox. To correct this mistake, we should desist from procreating. What could be more judicious or more urgent? At the very least, we might give some regard to this theory of the mistake as a ‘thought-experiment’. All civilizations become defunct. All species die out. All the suns of all the galaxies will blow up. There may even be an expiration date on the universe itself. Human beings would certainly not be the first phenomenon to go belly up. But we could be the first to spot our design-flaw, that absent-minded flub of nature called consciousness, and do something about it. And if we are mistaken about consciousness being a mistake, our self-removal from this planet would still be a magnificent move on our part, the most laudable masterstroke of our existence, and the only one. No evil

would attend our departure from existence, and the many evils we have known would go extinct along with us.

Taking our leave from life might seem a thoroughly negative course of action, but it is not as simple as that. Every negation is adulterated or secretly initiated by an affirmative spirit, mass suicide included. An unequivocal 'no' cannot be uttered or acted upon. Lucifer's last words in heaven may have been 'Non serviam', but none has served the Almighty so well, since His sideshow in the clouds would never draw any customers if it were not for the main attraction of the devil's hell on earth. Only catatonics and coma patients have what it takes to sit out the horseplay of creation. Without a 'yes' in our hearts, nothing would be done. And to be done with our existence *en masse* would be the most ambitious affirmation of all.

With regard to consciousness, 'fluke' or 'mutation', rather than 'mistake', would be more accurate terms in the present discussion, since it is not in the nature of Nature to make mistakes – it just makes what it makes. 'Mistake' has been used for its pejorative connotation in 'The Last Messiah'. Of course, phenomena other than consciousness have been thought to be a mistake, beginning with life itself. For example, in a novel titled *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), the American writer H. P. Lovecraft has one of his characters mention a 'primal myth' about 'Great Old Ones who filtered down from the stars and concocted earth life as a joke or mistake'. Schopenhauer, once he has drafted his theory that everything in the universe is energized by a Will-to-live, shifts to a commonsense pessimism to visualize a species inattentive to the possibility that its life is a concatenation of snafus.

Many millions, united into nations, strive for the common good, each individual for his own sake; but many thousands fall sacrifice to it. Now senseless delusion, now intriguing politics, incite them to wars with one another; then the sweat and blood of the multitude must flow, to carry through the ideas of individuals, or to atone for their shortcomings. In peace, industry and trade are active, inventions work miracles, seas are navigated, delicacies are collected from all the ends of the earth; the waves engulf thousands. All push and drive, some plotting and planning, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But what is the ultimate aim of it all? To sustain ephemeral and harassed individuals through a short span of time, in the most fortunate cases with endurable want and comparative painlessness (though boredom is at once on the lookout for this), and then the propagation of this race and of its activities. With this evident want of proportion between the effort and the reward, the will-to-live, taken objectively, appears to us from this point of view as a folly, or taken subjectively, as a delusion. Seized by this, every living thing works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that has no value. But on closer consideration, we shall find here also that it is rather a blind urge, an impulse wholly without ground and motive.<sup>15</sup>

Schopenhauer is here straightforward in limning his awareness that, for human beings, being alive is all 'folly' and 'delusion'. He also noted elsewhere in his work that consciousness is 'an accident of life'.

Schopenhauer's is a great pessimism, not least because it revealed a pattern underlying the pessimistic imagination. As indicated, Schopenhauer's insights are yoked to a philosophical superstructure centered on the Will, or the

15. *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (NY: Dover, 1969).

## COLLAPSE IV

Will-to-live, a blind, deaf, and dumb force that surfaced for reasons unknown, assembled a universe, and, once human bodies had shot up within it, mobilized them to their detriment. While Schopenhauer's metaphysics is impossible to swallow and could never persuade anyone of its validity, no intelligent person can fail to see that every living thing behaves *exactly* in conformance with his thought in its liberal articulation: wound up like toys by some force – call it Will, *élan vital*, *anima mundi*, or whatever – organisms go on running until they run down. In pessimistic philosophies, only the force is real, not the things that are activated by it. They are only automata, puppets, and, if they have consciousness mistakenly, believe that they are self-winding selves and not self-conscious nothings suffering from Zapffe's Paradox. Here, then, is the pattern Schopenhauer made discernable in pessimism: behind and beyond the scene of life, there are machinations that are not amenable to resistance or control. For Zapffe, consciousness is a mistake, but it is also a mystery whose workings elude us while we are tugged along by the invisible hand of nature to survive and reproduce. For Unamuno, we are prodded by an irrational and irresistible vitalism to lurch after immortality. For Michelstaedter, individuals are fitted into a straightjacket by faceless doctors who control their patients' minds with unrealities. For Mainländer, a Will-to-die, not a Will-to-live, plays the occult master pulling our strings.

Of a kind with these scheming powers that the pessimist places in the background of life are those enormities that skulk within the narratives of the great supernatural horror writers. In conceiving Azathoth, that 'nuclear chaos' which 'bubbles at the center of all infinity', Lovecraft might well have been thinking of Schopenhauer's Will. In 'The



Willows', the twentieth-century British writer Algernon Blackwood suggests the existence of a minatory force as unseen and pitiless as Zapffe's Nature. Such supernatural writers are great because they do not follow the rules of popular horror literature: there are no 'good versus evil' scenarios in their stories and no one need survive to make for a good ending. Human beings are set up to be destroyed, as they are in reality, and their destruction occurs not in an everyday world bustling with life and pleasure but in hermetic haunts bustling with death and suffering.

#### ECOCIDE

Despite Zapffe's work as a philosopher, although not in an occupational capacity (he earned his living by writing poems, plays, stories, and humorous pieces), he is nonetheless better known as an early ecologist who popularized the term 'biosophy' to name a discipline that would broaden the compass of philosophy to include the interests of other living things besides human beings. Thereupon, he serves as an inspiration to the environmentalist agenda, the politics of the health of the earth. Here, too, we catch ourselves – and Zapffe himself, as he affirmed – in the act of conspiring to build barricades against the odious facts of life by isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation as we engage in an activity (in this case the cause of environmentalism) that bypasses the perennial issue. Vandalism of the environment is but a sidebar to humanity's refusal to look its fate in the face. We live in a habitat of unrealities – not of earth, air, water, and wildlife – and cuddly illusion trumps grim logic every time. Some of the more militant environmentalists, however, have concurred with Zapffe that we should retire from existence, although their advocacy of abstinence and

universal suicide to save the earth from being pillaged by human beings is not exactly what the philosopher had in mind. While a worldwide suicide pact is highly appealing, what romantic fabrications would cause one to take part in it just to conserve this planet? The earth is not our home. We came from nothing, and to that condition our nostalgia should turn. Why would anyone care about this dim bulb in the blackness of space? The earth produced us, or at least subsidized our evolution. Is it really entitled to receive a pardon, never mind the sacrifice of human lives, for this original sin – a capital crime in reverse (just as reproduction makes one an accessory before the fact to an individual's death)? Someone once said that nature abhors a vacuum. This is precisely why nature should be abhorred. Instead, the nonhuman environment is simultaneously extolled and ravaged by a company of poor players who can no longer act naturally. It is one thing for animals to feed and fight and breed in an unthinking continuance of their existence. It is quite another for humans to do so, since it is possible for us to ask the wholly legitimate question: 'Is it really all right for us to be alive and know that we will die?'

It might be theorized that the human species evolved to serve as nature's roundabout way of cutting into its veins and bleeding out. A strange idea, no protesting that, but not the strangest we have ever heard or lived by. We could at least take up the theory and see where it leads. If it is false, then where is the harm? But until it is proven so, we must let ourselves be drawn along by nature's plan, as we always have, if only by twiddling our thumbs and letting its suicidal course continue without interference. From a human vantage, would this not be a just self-punishment on nature's part for fashioning a world in which pain is

essential, a world that could not exist without pain, a world where pain is the guiding principle of all organisms, which are inexorably pushed by pain throughout their lives to do that which will improve their chances to create more of themselves? Left unchecked, this process will last as long as a single cell remains quivering in this cesspool of the solar system, this toilet of the galaxy. So why not lend a hand in assisting nature's suicide, in case it has second thoughts? For want of a deity, let the earth take the blame for our troubles. What else is it good for? Let it save itself if it can – the condemned are known for the acrobatics they will execute to wriggle out of their sentences – but if it cannot destroy what it has made, then may it perish along with every other living thing it has brought forth in pain. While pain is not a problem for species, even a hyper-conscious hive of creatures such as human beings for whom pain has been upgraded to suffering, it is not a phenomenon whose praises are often sung.

#### DECIDE

The idea of a self-destructing nature parallels Mainländer's fantasy in which the Will-to-die that should inhere in humanity is only a reflection of the death wish of a God who, in the beginning, masterminded His own quietus from an existence He did not want to spin out any longer than it had already been spun. God's plan to suicide himself could not work, though, while he existed as a unified entity outside of space-time and matter. Seeking to nullify His oneness so that He could be delivered into nothingness, he disintegrated Himself – big bang-like – into the time-bound fragments of the universe, which included organic life forms. In Mainländer's philosophy,

'God knew that he could change from a state of super-reality into non-being only through the development of a real world of multiformity.' Through this method, He excluded Himself from existence. 'God is dead', wrote Mainländer, 'and His death was the life of the world'. Once the great individuation had been accomplished, the momentum of its creator's self-annihilation would continue until nothing remained standing. And those who committed suicide, as did Mainländer, would only be following God's example and moving toward the end of the Creation. Furthermore, the Will-to-live that Schopenhauer argued activates the world was revised by his disciple Mainländer as evidence not of a movement of a tortured life within beings, but as a deceptive cover for an underlying will in all things to burn themselves out as hastily as possible in the fires of becoming ... or begoing, as it were. In this light, human progress is shown to be an ironic symptom that our downfall into extinction has been progressing nicely, because the more things changed, the more they progressed toward a reliable end.

While the wisdom of religions such as Christianity and Buddhism is all for leaving this world behind, their leave-taking is for destinations unknown and impossible to conceive. For Mainländer, these destinations do not exist. His forecast is that one day our will to survive in this life or any other will be universally extinguished by a conscious will to die and stay dead, after the example of God. From the standpoint of Mainländer's philosophy, Zapffe's Last Messiah would not be an unwelcome sage but a crowning force that has been in the works since God took his own life. Rather than resist our end, as Mainländer concludes, we will come to see that the knowledge that life

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is worthless is the flower of all human wisdom. Elsewhere the philosopher states, Life is hell, and the sweet still night of absolute death is the annihilation of hell. Mainländer's cosmic scenario, inhospitable as it is to all other ideations that include a god-figure, should give pause to those absorbed with supernatural schemes that are no less bizarre (for example, the much-studied soteriology of the Gnostics). Consider this: if God exists, or once existed, what would He not be capable of doing? Why should God not want to be done with Himself as a reaction to His suffering the sickness and pain now reflected in His creation? Why should He not have kicked off a universe that is one great puppet show destined by Him to be crunched or scattered until an absolute nothingness has been established? Why should He fail to see the benefits of nonexistence, as many of us lesser beings have? Alone and immortal, nothing needed Him. In the same way, nothing in this world needs us, which could be why we created a god who pays attention to everything we do, since no other organism cares about us or could be diminished by our extinction. (Quite the opposite). Mainländer's first philosophy, and last, is in fact odd, but no more so than those of any religious or secular ethos that presupposes the worth of human life. Both are objectively insupportable and come out of nowhere: they are only propensities in search of validation.<sup>16</sup>

16. This précis of Mainländer's philosophy is sourced in Thomas Whittaker's *Essays and Notices Philosophy and Psychological*, 1895; Rudolph Steiner's *The Riddles of Philosophy*, 1914, and *Evil: Selected Lectures*, 1918; Radoslav Tsanoff's *The Nature of Evil*, 1931; Johann Joachim Gerstering's *German Pessimism and Indian Philosophy: A Hermeneutic Reading*, 1986; and Henry Sheldon's *Unbelief in the Nineteenth Century*, 2005. For a rebuttal of Mainländer's thought, see H. P. Blavatsky's 'The Origin of Evil' in the October 1897 issue of the journal *Lucifer*.





### PESSIMISM

It would be a sign of callowness to bemoan the fact that pessimistic writers do not rate and may be denounced in both good conscience and good company. This judgment makes every kind of sense in a world of card-carrying or crypto-optimists. Once you understand that, you can spare yourself from suffering excessively at the hands of ‘normal people’, a pestilent confederation of upstanding creatures who in concert keep the conspiracy going by rehashing their patented banalities and watchwords. This is not to say that such people do not have their struggles and responsibilities, their pains and sufferings, and their deaths by accident, murder, or disease, which only makes all the more pestilent their normal thinking that being alive is all right and that happiness should attend upon the arrival of life’s newcomers, who, it is always assumed, will be normal.

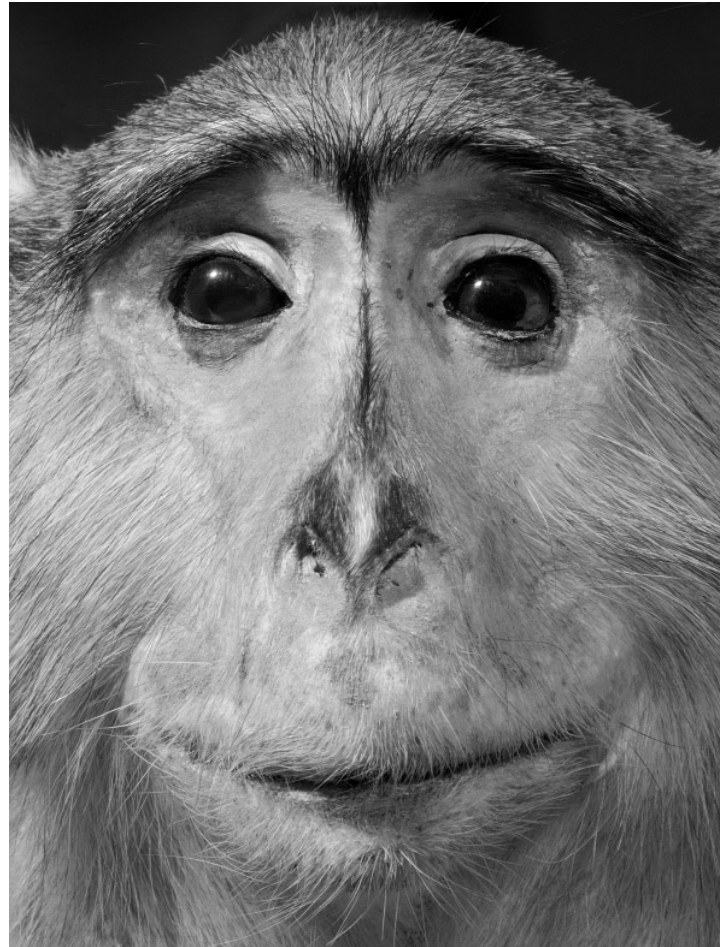
Phobic to any somber cast of thought, humankind as nonetheless imbibed ever-increasing disillusionments throughout its history. The biblical Genesis, along with all other fables of origination, has been reduced to a mythic analogue of the big bang theory and the primordial soup. Pantheon after pantheon has been belittled into ‘things people used to believe’. And petitions for divine intervention are murmured only inside the tents of religious fanatics and faith-healers. In the past century or so, disillusionments of this kind have become the province of specialists in the various sciences, so they are not well understood by, if known to, those who go to church on Sunday and read the astrology column in the newspaper the rest of the week. Generalists of disillusionment broadcast on a wider frequency. Yet their message, a repetitive dirge that has

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been rehearsed for thousands of years, is received only by epicures of pessimism, cognitive mavericks who have impetuously circled the field in a race to the finish line.

Contemporaneous with every generation, disillusionment must proceed furtively. Anyone caught trying to accelerate its progression will be reprimanded and told to sit in the corner. While the Church has lost its clout to kill or torture dissenters such as Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft, they are still under watch by guard dogs both sacred and secular. A sign of progress, some would say. But sufferance of such minds should not lead us into premature self-congratulation. The pace at which our kind plods toward disillusionment is geologically slow, and humanity can be cocksure of kicking the bucket by natural causes or an 'act of God' before it travels very far toward that radiant day when with one voice it might cry out, 'Enough of this error of conscious life. It shall be passed down no longer to those innocents unborn'.





## Spectral Dilemma<sup>1</sup>

Quentin Meillassoux

*Mourning to come, god to come.*

[...] every man has two things belonging to him, namely, a life and a phantom.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. THE SPECTRAL DILEMMA

What is a spectre? A dead person who has not been properly mourned, who haunts us, bothers us, refusing to pass over to the ‘other side’, where the dearly-departed can accompany us at a distance sufficient for us to live our own lives without forgetting them, but also without dying their death – without being the prisoner of the repetition of their final moments. Then what is a spectre become the essence of the spectre, the spectre *par excellence*? A dead person whose death is such that we cannot mourn them.

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1. Originally published as ‘Dilemme Spectrale’, in *Critique* 704-705, Jan/Feb 2006.

2. E. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 12.

That is to say: a dead person for whom the work of mourning, the passage of time, proves inadequate for a tranquil bond between them and the living to be envisaged. A dead person the horror of whose death lays heavy not only upon their nearest and dearest, but upon all those who cross the path of their history.

Essential spectres are those of terrible deaths: premature deaths, odious deaths, the death of a child, the death of parents knowing their children are destined to the same end – and yet others. Natural or violent deaths, deaths which cannot be come to terms with either by those whom they befall, or by those who survive them. Essential spectres are the dead who will always refuse to ‘pass over’, who obstinately cast off their shroud to declare to the living, in spite of all evidence, that they still belong amongst them. Their end attests to no meaning, brings with it no completion. These are not necessarily shadows who declare their revenge, but shadows who cry out beyond all vengeance. Whoever commits the imprudence of lending an ear to their call risks passing the rest of his life hearing their complaint.

We will call *essential mourning* the completion of mourning for essential spectres: that is to say the accomplishment of a living, rather than morbid, relation of the survivors to these terrible deaths. Essential mourning assumes the possibility of forming a vigilant bond with these departed which does not plunge us into the hopeless fear – itself mortifying – that we feel when faced with their end, but which, on the contrary, actively inserts their memory into the fabric of our existence. To accomplish essential mourning would mean: to live with essential spectres, thereby no longer to die with them. To make these spectres live rather than becoming,

in hearing their voices, the mere shadow of a living being. The question which poses itself to us is thus the following: *is essential mourning possible – and if so, under what conditions?*

Is it possible, after a twentieth century whose history was dominated by odious deaths, to live a non-morbid relation with the departed, for the most part unknown to us, and yet still too close for our lives not to be secretly gnawed away at by them? At first glance, we seem to find ourselves constrained to respond in the negative. For this essential mourning seems impossible to envisage if it is referred to the general alternative of which the relation to the departed seems to admit. This alternative can be stated, summarily, in very simple terms: either God exists, or he doesn’t. Or more generally: either a merciful spirit, transcending humanity, is at work in the world and its beyond, bringing justice for the departed; or such a transcendent principle is absent. Now, it becomes rapidly apparent that neither of these two options – let’s call them for convenience religious or atheistic, however innumerable the ways in which they can be configured – allows the requisite mourning to take place. To say that God exists, or that he does not – whatever is thought through these two statements, both are paths to despair when confronted with spectres. To demonstrate this, let us directly exhibit, in the form of ‘cases for the defence’, what appear to us to be the strongest responses of each position to the challenge of such a mourning.

Take the following religious apology: ‘I might hope to come to terms with my own death, but not that of terrible deaths. It is terror in confronting these past deaths, irremediably past, not my coming end, which makes me believe in God. Certainly, if my disappearance, by some chance, should be terrible, then I shall die hoping for myself

what I hope for spectres. But I myself am but a spectre in waiting. I can be Sadducean for myself, and for others, but I will always be Pharisean for spectres. Or again: I might be rigorously atheist for myself, might refuse to believe in immortality for myself, but I could never do so for them: For the idea that all justice is impossible for the innumerable massed spectres of the past corrodes my very core, so that I can no longer bear with the living. Certainly, it is they, the living, who need help, not the dead; but I think that help to the living can only proceed given some hope for justice for the dead. The atheist might well deny it: for my part if I were to renounce this, I could not live. I must hope for something *for* the dead also, or else life is vain. This something is another life, another chance to live – to live something other than that death which was theirs.’

Now take the following, atheist response: ‘You want to hope, you say, for something for the dead. Let’s look closer, then, at what you promise them. You hope for justice in the next world: but in what would this consist? It would be a justice done under the auspices of a God who had himself allowed the worst acts to be committed, in the case of criminal deaths, or who himself had committed them, in the case of natural deaths. You call just, and even good, such a God. But what would you think of this: the promise to live eternally under the reign of a being called just and loving, who has, however, let men, women and children die in the worst circumstances, when he could have saved them without any difficulty whatsoever; who has even directly inflicted such sorrows – And even this, He says, as a mark of his infinite (and thus mysterious, unfathomable) love for the creatures he thus afflicts. To live under the reign of such a perverse being, who corrupts the most

noble words – love, justice – with his odious practices: isn’t this a good definition of hell? You say that in the dazzling presence of such a God, I will grasp the infinitely loving nature of his attitude to his creatures? You only succeed in exacerbating the nightmare you promise: for you suppose that this being has the power to spiritually transform me in such a radical fashion as to make me love He who allows such atrocities to occur, for having let those atrocities occur. This is a promise of a spiritual death infinitely worse than a merely bodily death: in the presence of God, I will cease to love the Good, for He would have the power to make me love Evil as if it were Good. If God exists, the exit of the dead is thus aggravated to infinity: their bodily death is redoubled in their spiritual death. To this hell you wish for them, I prefer, for them as for myself, nothingness, which will leave them in peace and conserve their dignity, rather than putting them at the mercy of the omnipotence of your pitiless Demiurge.’

We can see that each of these two positions is only supported by the weakness of the other: the atheist is atheist because religion promises a fearful God; the believer anchors his faith in the refusal of a life devastated by the despair of terrible deaths. Each masks his specific despair by exhibiting his avoidance of the other’s despair. Thus the dilemma is as follows: either to despair of another life for the dead, or to despair of a God who has let such deaths take place.

We will call *spectral dilemma* the aporetic alternative of atheism and religion when confronted with the mourning of essential spectres.<sup>3</sup> In this aporetic alternative, we

3. I have called ‘religious’ every position which brings together the thesis of a life beyond the grave with the existence of a personal God; ‘atheistic’ every position

oscillate between the absurdity of a life without God, and the mystery of a God who calls 'love' his *laissez-faire* and production of extreme evil: the double form of a failure to accomplish essential mourning. On the contrary, we will call a *resolution* of the spectral dilemma a position which would be neither religious nor atheist, and which, because of this, would manage to extract itself from the double despair inherent to their alternative: despairing at the belief in justice for the dead, or believing despairingly in a God without justice. Our question concerning the possibility of essential mourning can be reformulated as follows: *Under what conditions could we hope to resolve the spectral dilemma?* How to think a bond between the living and dead which extracts itself from the twofold distress of the atheist and the religious believer?

To sketch a possible response to this question, we must proceed in the following fashion: we must exhibit the conditions of a solution to the dilemma, and evaluate the theoretical legitimacy of the latter along with its credibility. We do not exclude, of course, the possibility that this solution might eventually turn out to be illusory, and that we might have in the end to renounce extracting ourselves from the attheo-religious alternative. But this potential renunciation must proceed only from the precise examination of the solution. Not being able to present the

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which recuses both of these theses. One might certainly conceive of positions which derogate from this convenient classification: Sadduceanism, evoked above, conjugates the belief in a personal God with the refusal of immortality; Spinozism, on the other hand, conjugates the recusal of a personal God with the thesis of a possible immortality. However, such positions do not change the essential point of the analysis: the incapacity of the principal systems of representation to resolve the spectral dilemma. In the case of Sadduceanism, I add to the despair of an evil God the despair of the non-resurrection of the dead; in the case of Spinozism, I must renounce all hope of a happy immortality for those who perished too soon to accede to wisdom, and accommodate myself to the pitiless necessity which presides over this type of destiny.

latter in its totality, we will content ourselves here with commencing its exposition.

## 2. CONDITIONS FOR THE RESOLUTION OF THE DILEMMA: THE DIVINE INEXISTENCE

Let us begin by exposing what we shall call the 'formal' conditions for a resolution of the dilemma. These conditions constitute at once the irreducibly legitimate part of the two preceding positions – atheistic and religious – and the source of the aporia. Each of these positions of the dilemma exhibits, we believe, an indispensable element of essential mourning:

- the religious position establishes that mourning is not possible unless we can hope for the dead something other than their death. The spectres will not pass over to the other world until the day we might hope to see them rejoin ours.
- The atheistic position establishes that the existence of God is an insurmountable obstacle to the elaboration of such despair, for only a perverse God could permit terrible deaths, and only an even more perverse God could make himself loved for doing so.

The aporia stems from the fact that these two conditions, equally indispensable, appear incompatible. There is only one way, then, to lift this impasse: we must prove that the incompatibility between these conditions is only apparent, and that there exists a third option, neither religious nor atheistic, capable of coherently combining the two elements of the response. From this point on, our path is clear: *resolving the dilemma comes down to making thinkable the statement*

*conjugating the possible resurrection of the dead* – the religious condition of the resolution – *and the inexistence of God* – the atheistic condition of the resolution. These two elements will be synthesised in the following statement, which will occupy our attention from now on:

*God no longer exists.*

This statement formulates a thesis which we will call the thesis of *divine inexistence*, an expression that must be understood in the twofold sense that permits its equivocity. Firstly, in an immediate fashion, the divine inexistence signifies *the inexistence of the religious God*, but also the metaphysical God, supposed actually existent as Creator or Principle of the world. But the divine inexistence also signifies *the divine character of inexistence*: in other words, the fact that what remains still in a virtual state in present reality harbours the possibility of a God still to come, become innocent of the disasters of the world, and in which one might anticipate the power to accord to spectres something other than their death.

The position of the divine inexistence allows us to grasp the source of the apparent insolubility of the spectral dilemma. The latter comes from the fact that atheism and religion seem to constitute an alternative exhausting all the possibilities: either God exists, or he does not. But the two theses are in truth stronger than these factual statements: for their sense lies in the supposedly *necessary* character of either the inexistence or the existence of God. To be atheist is not simply to maintain that God does not exist, but also that he could not exist; to be a believer is to have faith in the essential existence of God. We now see that the thesis of the divine inexistence must, to gain ground against such an alternative, shift the battle to the terrain of modalities:

It is a question of maintaining that *God is possible* – not in a subjective and synchronous sense (in the sense that I maintain that it is possible that God currently exists), but in an objective future sense (where I maintain that God could really come about in the future). At stake is the unknottng of the ateo-religious link between God and necessity (God must or must not exist) and its reattachment to the virtual (God could exist).

The question then takes on a greater precision: resolving the spectral dilemma comes down to exhibiting the exact sense of the divine inexistence, at the same time as establishing that one can legitimately adhere to it.

The thesis – God no longer exists – can be decomposed according to two poles of signification which must then be studied consecutively:

1. What must be signified by a ‘no longer’, in order for a god to be thought as one of its eventualities? Such an examination comes down to thinking the signification of a time compatible with essential mourning: What is time, if it contains the divine as one of its virtualities, and what could legitimate our belief in the effectivity of the latter?
2. What does the signifier ‘god’ really mean once the latter is no longer posited as existing – as possible and to come, but no longer as actual and necessary? Such an examination would necessitate, notably, an elaboration of the elements of a discourse on the divine distinct from all theology founded on the thesis of an eternal God.

Within the confines of the present article we can only broach the first point. We will thus agree here to understand

by 'god' the minimal sense required for an essential mourning to be envisaged: the emergence of a regime of existence in which, for the spectres, something begins other than their death.

### 3. SPECULATIVE TREATMENT OF HUME'S PROBLEM

What would a time capable of divine emergence be? And what could make us decide to adhere to the idea of such a time, knowing that our all-too-evident desire to believe, far from rendering the task easier for us, can only increase our suspicion in regard to every plea which flatters our hopes?

Before entering into the heart of the subject, let us begin by distinguishing the so-called 'occult' senses of the divine inexistence, that is to say those which rest upon the thesis that a hidden law exists, unknown for the moment, but capable of being at the origin of a redemption to come. This thesis comes down to an atheistic or religious interpretation of the divine inexistence, depending on whether it will be a question of founding the hope of rebirth on the Promethean mastery of death by a future humanity supposed technically capable of effectuating it; or a question of maintaining that a necessary process of divinisation of the world is already secretly in progress, which will culminate in universal justice for the living and the dead alike. In both cases, one maintains that an occult law exists upon which all hopes must rest: a natural law not yet known, of the resurrection of bodies, a providential law of progressive emergence of the divine – indemonstrable, even fantastic, theses, incapable in any case of supporting any serious hope.

But as soon as we prohibit ourselves any such path, we

must say of the sought-after God not only that it must be posited as inexistent and possible, but also that it can only be conceived as *contingent* and *unmasterable*. This God, in fact, cannot be posited except as contingent, in the sense that, if its thinkability supposes that nothing prohibits its advent, inversely, no destinal law can be supposed to guarantee its emergence, for such a supposition is still theoretically exorbitant. It must be able to be, but nothing can be thought that constrains it to be. And this God can only be thought as unmasterable in its advent, in the sense that it must exceed all phantasmatic hopes of absolute domination of nature on the part of man. Neither Prometheanism of death vanquished, nor providentialism of a god to come – which are just exacerbated versions of atheism and religion confronted with the spectral dilemma – can found the hope of a solution.

Taking as granted the following hypotheses:

1. The laws of nature do not allow us to hold out any serious hope of a future rebirth of the departed.
2. Neither is there any hope of a transcendent Order of laws of nature, a bringer of justice for living and dead, whether actually at work, or in the course of emerging.

What outcome remains to us? It suffices, in response to this question, to determine what it is in such hypotheses that constitutes an obstacle to essential mourning: What seems to prohibit any resolution of the spectral dilemma, once I renounce the idea that a law exists, either natural or supernatural, capable of realising my hopes? The response is obvious: If I admit that there only exist natural laws incapable of resolving my dilemma, then this dilemma is

insoluble, in so far as – but only in so far as – I admit also *the necessity of the laws of nature*. It is not the incompatibility between the laws of nature and the divine which prevents essential mourning; it is the belief in the necessity of such laws. And it is indeed this modal thesis which founds the atheistic belief in the impossibility of the existence of God, as of any event contradicting the attested constants.

The first question we must treat is thus as follows: what founds my adhesion to the necessity of laws, and thereby my refusal of any possible event's contradicting them? Now, this problem is well-known since it is precisely *the question posed by Hume concerning the rational justification of our belief in causal necessity*. We are consequently confronted once more by this question, but – let us note well, for this is the speculative interest of the matter – we must tackle it 'backwards' in relation to its traditional treatment.

Let us explain. The usual way of posing the question of causal necessity proceeds with the interrogation as formulated by Hume himself, and which can be stated as follows: it being understood that we believe in the necessity of laws, can this belief be founded in reason, so as to guarantee that laws will be in the future what they are today, all other circumstances being equal? The aporia encountered by Hume consists in the fact that neither logic nor experience are able to offer any such justification. For, on one hand, there is nothing contradictory in the observable constants being modified in the future; and, on the other, experience teaches us only about the present and the past, not the future. So that the supposed necessity of natural laws becomes an enigma since the Principle of Sufficient Reason cannot be effectively applied to it: We cannot rationally discover any reason why laws should be

so rather than otherwise, that is to say why they should remain in their current state rather than being arbitrarily modified from one moment to the next.

Now, our perspective is the inverse of Hume's: for we propose on the contrary to start out from the *effective possibility* that natural laws might break down without reason, in favour of an eventality incompatible with them. For we pose the following question: since Hume has convinced us that we could *a priori* (that is to say without contradiction) conceive a chaotic modification of natural laws, why not have confidence in the power of thought, which invites us to posit the *contingency* of the laws of nature, rather than in experience, in which alone the presentation of the apparent fixity of observable constants finds its source? Why extrapolate the empirical fixity of laws into a belief in their necessity, rather than adhering to the intellection of a radical Chaos which Hume has masterfully, if implicitly, revealed to us? Why not, in other words, *absolutise* the failure of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, by maintaining that the meaning of that absence of reason for laws which we run up against in the Humean problem is not an incapacity of thought to discover such reasons, but a capacity of thought to intuit *a priori*, in the real itself, the effective absence of the reason of things as laws, and the possibility of their being modified at any moment? It would be a question of making of contingency the absolute property of every being, laws as well as things – a property which a redefined reason, *a reason emancipated from the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, would take as its task to conceive and to describe. Thus the idea presents itself of an *inverted*, rather than a *reversed* Platonism, a Platonism which would maintain that thought must free itself from the fascination for the phenomenal fixity of laws,

so as to accede to a purely intelligible Chaos capable of destroying and of producing, without reason, things and the laws which they obey.

Does this mean that we will have resolved Hume's problem when we have posited the contingency of laws rather than their necessity? No, indeed, for we are then confronted by another problem, in the form of an objection expressing the reason why our thesis does not appear credible, namely: If laws could be modified without reason at any moment, it would be *extraordinarily improbable* if this possibility were never to manifest itself. And in truth, if matter could incessantly, in the least of its parts, follow innumerable different laws, the disorder would be such that there would not even be manifestation. This argument, as we know, is the very core of Kant's transcendental deduction: the contingency of laws is incompatible with the constitutive stability of representation. But our task is more precise now: to resolve the reformulated Humean problem, *we must refute such an inference, from the contingency of laws to a frequent, even frenetic, disorder, whether of matter or of representation*; we must establish that the manifest stability of laws does not demand that we maintain their necessity. Such is the first problem – which is far from being the last – that the spectral dilemma obliges us to resolve if we would recuse the impossibility of a counter-natural event coming to pass. From this point on, God must be thought as *the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law*.

Let us agree to call *speculative* all philosophies which accord to thought the capacity to accede to an absolute, and *metaphysical* all philosophies which ground themselves on a modality of the Principle of Sufficient Reason to accede to

the absolute. All metaphysics, according to this reading, cannot but be speculative; however, not all speculation is necessarily fated to be metaphysical. For speculation which founded itself on the radical *falsity* of the Principle of Sufficient Reason would describe an absolute which would not constrain things to being thus rather than otherwise, but which would constrain them to being able not to be how they are. We can therefore formulate the conclusion at which we wished to arrive at, namely that *the existential resolution of the spectral dilemma passes by way of the speculative, but non-metaphysical, resolution of Hume's problem*.

\* \* \*

A few words, to conclude, on the inexistent god. How – according to what principles of investigation – might one attempt to designate its nature, once the latter is defined as a contingent effect of Chaos? On this point, we must agree to pose again, outside the transcendental field, a Kantian-style question: What am I permitted to hope for, now that I can hope? What is a god which would be once more desirable, lovable, worthy of imitation? If one supposes granted the real eventuality of emergences in rupture with the present laws of nature, what will be the most singular possible divinity, the most interesting, the most 'noble' in a sense (paradoxically) close to Nietzsche's? Must this future and immanent god be personal, or consist in a 'harmony', a becalmed community of living, of dead, and of reborn? We believe that precise responses to these questions can be envisaged, and that they determine an original regime of thought, in rupture with both atheism and theology: a *divinology*, yet to be constituted, through which will be fabricated, perhaps, new links between men and those who haunt them.



### *Horror Temporis*

Benjamin Noys

In his 'Notes on Writing Weird Fiction' (1937) Lovecraft wrote that time played such a large part in his fiction because he found it 'the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe'.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the horror of time is not simply the trifling matter of individual human finitude, but rather the recognition of scientific statements concerning cosmic timescales that precede and exceed the existence of humanity and life itself. Unlike Engels, who hoped against hope for future relief from the second law of thermodynamics,<sup>2</sup> Lovecraft only foresaw future extinction.

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1. H. P. Lovecraft, 'Notes on Writing Weird Fiction' (1937). *Malacandra*. 2003. At <http://www.geocities.com/soho/cafe/1131/14notesen.htm>

2. As Engels puts it, in the vein of William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land* (1912): Millions of years may elapse, hundreds of thousands of generations be born and die, but inexorably the time will come when the declining warmth of the sun will no longer suffice to melt the ice thrusting itself forward from the poles; when the human race, crowding more and more about the equator, will finally no longer

A science that produces time as indifferent to humanity is thus the source of the *horror temporis*. On the other hand, he writes that his stories are concerned with achieving the ‘suspension or violation’ of natural laws in order to probe ‘the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis.’ This suspension seems to promise an oneiric mysticism in the Dunsanian vein that escapes ‘the prison-house of the known’ into the ‘enchanted lands of incredible adventures and infinite possibilities’. Thus, we seem to be left with the paradox of a horror based on science that threatens to proceed through an insipid anti-scientific mysticism. But Lovecraft’s actual solution, at least in his great texts, was more inventive: the suspension of natural laws would produce a new materialism which liberates us into the experience of the horror of time in its subtraction from any law and any relation.<sup>3</sup>

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find even there enough heat for life; when gradually even the last trace of organic life will vanish; and the earth, an extinct frozen globe like the moon, will circle in deepest darkness and in an ever narrower orbit about the equally extinct sun, and at last fall into it. Other planets will have preceded it, others will follow it; instead of the bright, warm solar system with its harmonious arrangement of members, only a cold, dead sphere will still pursue its lonely path through universal space. And what will happen to our solar system will happen sooner or later to all the other systems of our island universe; it will happen to all the other innumerable island universes, even to those the light of which will never reach the earth while there is a living human eye to receive it.

And when such a solar system has completed its life history and succumbs to the fate of all that is finite, death, what then? Will the sun’s corpse roll on for all eternity through infinite space, and all the once infinitely diverse, differentiated natural forces pass for ever into one single form of motion, attraction? ‘Or’ - as Secchi asks - ‘do forces exist in nature which can re-convert the dead system into its original state of an incandescent nebula and re-awake it to new life? We do not know’.

*Dialectics of Nature* (1883) ‘Introduction’. At <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/don/ch01.htm>

3. This obviously indexes the work of Quentin Meillassoux, in particular his paper ‘Subtraction and Contraction’, *COLLAPSE III* (2007): 63-107. Through a reading of

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The question is of ‘the mode of manifestation’ of this operation, which Lovecraft regards as requiring an ‘object embodying the horror and phenomena observed’. His fiction works through images of these objects, through the domain of the imaginary, but only through the impasse where the imaginary touches upon the real. If scientific laws provide him with the final regulative guarantee of consistency then his fiction probes the inconsistency of ‘shattered natural law’ and the inconsistency of the object. To achieve this effect requires the gradual purification of the object from the regulation of representation. In the case of time this process can be traced in the last of his great texts: ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ (1936).<sup>4</sup> Here it is a matter of what kind of object constitutes the shadow that falls from the outside – not a mystical outside of completed alterity, the *tout Autre*, but a material ‘outside’ which does not respond to the effect of law or to any correlation or relation to humanity.

That outside is named in the opening of the story as the ‘seething vortex of time’. The preliminary image of the vortex obviously derives from Poe and his use of the vortex in the form of a whirlpool in a number of his stories.

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Bergson and Deleuze Meillassoux approaches a subtractive thinking of matter as ‘an infinite madness’ in which,

we would have to conceive what our life would be if all the movements of the earth, all the noises of the earth, all the smells, the tastes, all the light – of the earth and of elsewhere, came to us in a moment, in an instant – like an atrocious screaming tumult of all things, traversing us continuously and instantaneously. (104)

Can we suggest that this is often the state of the Lovecraftian hero at the end of many of the stories? Can we also suggest, alongside Meillassoux, that this indicates the ruination of philosophy in ‘absolute communication’, the point at which Lovecraft indicates the collapse of the philosophical in chaos?

4. H. P. Lovecraft ‘The Shadow Out of Time’ in H. P. Lovecraft, *The H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3: The Haunter of the Dark and Other Tales* (London: Panther Books, 1985), 464-544.

Take, for example, this description from 'A Descent into the Maelström' (1841): 'the interior surface of a funnel vast in circumference, prodigious in depth, and whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony, but for the bewildering rapidity with which they spun around.' In this case we have an image taken from nature that embodies a turbulent flow in excess of mechanistic materialism. This is nature itself as what Lacan would call *antiphysis* – a 'rotten', chaotic, fractured nature. Lovecraft radicalises this impasse of nature by not containing it within nature as an emergent fracture. Instead, as the 'seething vortex of time', the vortex becomes the chaotic space of the emergence of nature itself: the Outside. We no longer have a confined phenomena, a hole in the imaginary through which the real surges. Lacan would state that while the real does not lack anything, it is full of holes and one can even make a vacuum in it.

The mode of manifestation proceeds through a number of supplementary objects of horror that embody the shadow that falls from outside. In the first instance the shadow falls on the story's narrator, Nathaniel Peaslee, when he suffers from a strange experience of amnesia between 1908 and 1913 (the same period as Lovecraft's own nervous breakdown). As the narrative unfolds it soon becomes evident that Peaslee had his mind exchanged with a member of the Great Race – alien beings that lived on the earth fifty million years before mankind and that have mastered the secret of time. When Peaslee returns to his body he finds that 'my conception of *time* – my ability to distinguish between consecutiveness and simultaneousness – seemed subtly disordered'. This disorder of time can be explained as a result of the transference or interference by the Great Race, but also by the impact of his realisation that

for these alien creatures 'there was no such thing as time in its humanly accepted sense.' During the period in which Lovecraft was writing, Heidegger and Bergson were trying to produce new concepts of time that would correlate, in however attenuated a fashion, with the human experience of time. What Lovecraft suggests is the detachment of time from any relation to humanity – proceeding without philosophy towards the real.

This, though, is only the first object of *horror temporis*. Despite the monstrous nature of these creatures, Lovecraft's narrator evinces considerable sympathy for the Great Race and their project to gather knowledge, and secure their future survival, by this process of mind exchange. The organisation of their social system by 'a sort of fascistic socialism' dominated by a clerisy implies a kind of cosmic Keynesian planner-State of the kind Lovecraft himself obviously approved. The crisis that State has to manage is the threat of the elder beings – the second object of horror. These 'half polypous, utterly alien entities' are only partly material (here we see the purification of the object) and dominated the earth six hundred million years ago. The Great Race would subdue these creatures beneath the cities they had built and which were then occupied by the Great Race. The old mole of alien class struggle had literally gone underground only to sporadically erupt in revolutions 'shocking beyond all description'. The final flight of the Great Race to new bodies would be caused by the 'final successful irruption of the elder beings'.<sup>5</sup>

This little allegory of 1917 and the New Deal requires little deciphering, especially after China Miéville's reading

5. H. P. Lovecraft 'The Shadow Out of Time', 502, 504, 505, 506.

of *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931).<sup>6</sup> The layering of these two objects of horror can be found in Peaslee's exploration of the ancient city of the Great Race in the Australian desert, as he searches for definitive proof of his abduction. The city itself forms an abyss, parallel to the horror of the vortex, with its 'vast chain of aeon-dead black gulfs'. Within the abyssal city, however, there is a further abyss. This is one of the prisons of the 'elder things': a 'downward aperture' open and 'yawning unguarded down to abysses past imagination'. Returning back past the open trap door Peaslee stumbles and hears the resultant noise answered by 'a shrill, whistling sound, like nothing else on earth, and beyond any adequate verbal description' – the sound of the elder beings. These 'tides of abomination surging up through the cleft itself'<sup>7</sup> fill-out the abyss or vortex with a material presence. Unlike *At the Mountains of Madness* we are not greeted with the appearance of these creatures; instead they remain signalled only by sound.

Therefore this filling-out of the abyss is withdrawn and we are faced with a further layer of the shadow. The alien whistling of the creatures calls up another fear, the fear of being 'engulfed in a pandemoniac vortex of loathsome sound and utter, materially tangible blackness'.<sup>8</sup> The 'materiality' here is the subtractive or purified materiality of the vortex of seething time – the seething blackness of chaos. Recall 'The Music of Erich Zann' (1921),<sup>9</sup> in which the mad music of Zann is played to ward off something

6. China Miéville, 'Introduction' in H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), xi-xxv.

7. H. P. Lovecraft 'The Shadow Out of Time', 526, 529, 534, 539, 541.

8. Ibid., 541.

9. H. P. Lovecraft 'The Music of Erich Zann' in *Omnibus 3*, 335-345.

worse: 'the blackness of space illimitable; unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance of anything on earth.'<sup>10</sup> The narrative had earlier made clear how even the horror of the elder beings is finite; the Great Race knows that these creatures 'were slowly weakening with the aeons. Indeed, it was known that they would be quite dead in the time of the post-human beetle race which the fleeing minds would tenant'.<sup>11</sup> No consciousness, alien or human, subtends the seething vortex of time.

Sound is then only the signal for the definitive rupture of the *musica universalis* – and the revelation of the real qua chaos – compact but full of holes. But this effect is withdrawn. The final 'shattering' revelation of Lovecraft's narrative is the – by now for the reader, entirely predictable – recovery by the narrator of a text from the depths of the alien city written in his own hand. This forms the definitive proof that 'there lies upon this world of man a shocking and incredible shadow out of time'. In this revelation we witness the retraction of the horror back towards the constraints of the object. Lovecraft himself remained dissatisfied with the story and refused to type it up. If every critical reading is a kind of rewriting, and often, as in this case, something of the expression of the text we desired rather than the text we have, then what I desire is that 'terrible thing': a fiction of the 'seething vortex of time'.

I, Nathaniel Peaslee, have found that last proof of my otherness written in my own hand. But then this textual proof serves to keep me guarded as one of the chosen of the Great Race. I is another, another subject. We might all be doomed but I,

10. Ibid, 343-4.

11. H. P. Lovecraft 'The Shadow Out of Time', 506.

Nathaniel Peaslee, have had the honour of being chosen as a great mind who will be recorded.

Something, however, whispers in poor Nathaniel's ear: What about the shadow out of time? You presume that the shadow comes from outside. You suggest, implicitly, some stable and material outside that forms the flipside of existent reality. I come with the good bad news, the shadow out of time does not exist outside time, it is time. Time itself is the shadowy vortex of a 'matter' that forms nothing and has no need of you, anyone or anything else. Good night Nathaniel and good luck.

## Drawings

Todosch

p.290, p.297 (detail), p.306, p.313 (detail), p.320.  
All Ink on Paper, 50 x 32 cm.

Being and Slime:  
The Mathematics of Protoplasm  
in Lorenz Oken's 'Physio-Philosophy'

Iain Hamilton Grant

*It is a daring act of reason to set humanity free and to abstract the shock of the objective world; yet the venture cannot miscarry, since man becomes greater to the degree he knows himself and his strength.*

Schelling<sup>1</sup>

*A philosophy or ethics without a philosophy of nature is a non-thing, a bare contradiction, like a flower without a stem.*

Oken<sup>2</sup>

**1. INTRODUCTION: THE NON-THING OR, ON THE FORMS  
OCCURRING IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY**

The fate of post-Kantian philosophy depends on whether the 'shock of the objective world' can be overcome by self-knowledge, on the actuality of the 'shock of the actual'.<sup>3</sup> A seismic chain runs through transcendentalism's subjugation of earthquakes to epistemology, a vulcanism poignantly articulated in the objections of the cosmologist Johann Heinrich Lambert to Kant's relegation of time to an a priori form of inner intuition: '*If changes are real, then time is real [...] If time is unreal, then no change can be real.*'<sup>4</sup> This is the shock of physics shattering the

insularity of transcendental subjectivity, demonstrating the stakes of the modal investigation of epistemogenesis with which the transcendental philosophy attempted to replace ontology.

Schelling's account of transcendentalism as a 'daring act of reason' clearly articulates the substitution of ethics for ontology that lies at its core. The accuracy of this diagnosis is certainly revealed in transcendental philosophy's restriction of reality to the scope of possible intuition,

1. Schelling, *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy*, in *Schellings sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J.G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1856-1861), 14 vols, cited as *SW* 1-14. Here *SW* 1: 157.

2. Lorenz Oken, *Elements of Physiophilosophy*, Alfred Tulk's translation, which I have occasionally modified, of Oken's *Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie*, 3 vols (Jena: Friedrich Frommann, 1809, 1810, 1811, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Zürich 1843). References throughout will be to *Elements* followed by the section numbers common both to Tulk's work and the recent republication of the *Lehrbuch* as volume 2 of the newly published *Oken's gesammelte Werke*, ed. Thomas Bach, Olaf Breidbach and Dietrich von Engelhardt (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 2007). On Oken, see Michael T. Ghiselin, 'Lorenz Oken', in Thomas Bach and Olaf Breidbach, eds., *Naturphilosophie nach Schelling*. (Schellingiana 17) (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann Holzboog, 2005), 433-57; Olaf Breidbach and Michael T. Ghiselin, 'Lorenz Oken's *Naturphilosophie* in Jena, Paris and London', in *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 24 (2002), 219-47; and Olaf Breidbach, Hans-Joachim Fliedner and Klaus Ries, eds. *Lorenz Oken. Ein politischer Naturphilosoph* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 2001).

3. Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, as cited by Hegel in the *Rezensionen aus den Jahrbüchern für wissenschaftliche Kritik* in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Werke* ed. Eva Moldenhauer und Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), vol.11: 215. Interestingly, Hegel is here discussing the relation between actuality and freedom.

4. Lambert, Letter to Kant of October 13<sup>th</sup> 1770 in *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902ff), cited *Ak*. Here *Ak*.X: 107 (italics in original). Lambert is responding to § 14 of *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*, where Kant argued that 'although time, posited in itself and absolutely, would be an imaginary being [...], it is a condition, extending to infinity, of intuitive representation for all possible objects of the senses' (*Ak*.II: 401; 1992a: 395). Kant echoes Lambert's question and his response in the first *Critique*: 'Time is certainly something real, namely, the real form of inner intuition' (*A36-6/B53-4*).

but its terms are more overtly displayed in the unstable dualism of teleology and mechanism in the third *Critique*. The dualism is unstable, because despite appearances, it is not *only* a dispute about natural causality (although this is certainly part of it), but outlines the procedure whereby physical grounds are reduced to the inscrutable abjecta of reason's ultimately moral actualisation. This procedure consists in (a) maintaining the phenomenal indifference of moral and natural purposes in keeping with the constraints placed by the first *Critique* on theoretical reason; while (b) extending the authority of practical over theoretical reason, in keeping with the second *Critique*; and *thereby* (c) rejecting ontology for an ethicised phenomenology. It should be noted, moreover, that the logical form of this procedure is self-reinforcing: (a) + (b) = (c) = (a) + (b). We shall call it the ethical process.

The claim of this paper is that this ethical process is as untenable as it is ubiquitous. It is point (c) that makes it recognisably ubiquitous, although usually (not always) without the string of reasons (a) and (b) that establish it. It is untenable because reason must now affirm ethical grounding as the absence of grounds, or *the absence of grounds as ethical grounding*. The ethical process is the principal element of the philosophy of what Oken, above, calls the 'bare contradiction, the non-thing'.

In the equation of 'bare contradiction' and 'non-thing', it is clear that Oken considers logical forms to entail ontological consequences: that a *bare* contradiction is a non-thing. This is in complete contradiction to the verdict of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, where he dismisses Oken as practising a 'mere formalism' comprising nothing but 'assertions' common to 'the philosophy of nature of his



time'.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, what the geological *Naturphilosoph* Henrik Steffens called Oken's 'hard, insurmountable realism'<sup>6</sup> consists, in part, in a realism with regard to *grounds*. The core philosophical problem to which Oken's *Naturphilosophie* is addressed is consequently to determine 'how something derived its existence from nothing'.<sup>7</sup> As will become apparent, the 'nothing' from which 'somethings' always derive their existence is the mathematical nothing, the *zero*. Thus, Oken's 'generative history of the world'<sup>8</sup> consists entirely in demonstrating the *repeated* ontological consequences of what he calls, emphasising this generative operation, the *mathes-is* issuing from Zero. Thus, the formal reason of an existent is = the real ground of existence = 0. The question is whether the zero is always the same, i.e. whether 0 is always = 0, or whether, for instance, in the domain of biology, the 0 is *slimy*.

The story is often told that the immediate post-Kantian reaction consists in the 'organicist turn', with Goethe, Schelling and the *Naturphilosophen* cited as evidence. While it is certainly true that the post-Kantian philosophers and naturalists attempted to resolve Kant's dualism by way of organic or self-organizing causality, this story remains

5. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) §346, *Zusatz*. There are moments in the *Elements*, notably its first section, that seem to ratify Hegel's assessment: 'Philosophy, as the science which embraces the principles of the universe or world, is only a logical, which may perhaps conduct us to the real, conception.' Hegel ignores countervailing propositions: 'what holds good of mathematical principles must also hold good of the principles of nature' (*Elements* 67).

6. Henrik Steffens, *Schriften alt und neu* Vol.1. (Breslau 1821: 81), cited in Hinrich Knittermeyer *Schelling und die romantische Schule* (München: Ernst Reinhardt, 1928), 192.

7. *Elements*, 10.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

philosophically inadequate. In brief, the reasons for the insufficiency of this story are (i) that it segregates philosophy from nature, making the former merely the corollary of the latter; and (ii) that by making the naturalisation of teleology versus cognitively insuperable intentionality (the problem of ‘access’) into the only significant problem to which the Idealists contribute, it (iii) leaves the problem of the forms of realism pursued in the long aftermath of Kantianism, entirely unaddressed. This essay will therefore take Oken’s Mathesis as a particular case study in the pursuit of a post-Kantian realism reducible neither to dogmatism nor to the ethical process, a pursuit that remains as insistent today as it did two hundred years ago.

## 2. PHYSIO-PHILOSOPHY AS THE SYSTEM OF THE GENERATION OF THE WORLD

The *Elements of Physio-Philosophy* (*Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie*) is a summative work that synthesises Oken’s previous researches. Since his Preface to the *Lehrbuch* provides a retrospective of this works, and since, like most of the *Naturphilosophen*, Oken remains as scorned as he is ignored, we will introduce the main points of Oken’s system through his own bibliographical commentary.

Oken’s first work, the *Outline of Nature Philosophy, Theory of the Senses and the Animal Classification based Thereupon* (1802), sets out from the thesis that ‘the animal classes are virtually nothing else than a representation of the sense-organs’, a position by which, he states, he ‘still abides’ in the *Elements* (xi). This is notable both in its attempt to infer a system from physiological particulars, a realism that will survive, just as it is inverted, in the *Elements*; and in the structural role it allots to the theory of recapitulation, further developed and exemplified in this gloss of the theory as propounded

in *On the Significance of the Cranial Bone* (1807):

[...] the head is nothing other than a vertebral column [...] [just as] the maxillae are nothing else but repetitions of arms and feet, the teeth being their nails [...] <sup>9</sup>

This ‘vertebral theory of the skull’, over the discovery of which Oken disputed with Goethe,<sup>10</sup> not only ‘supposed a community between the human skull and that of the lower vertebrates’, but extended beyond the organic into the mineral, geological and cosmogenic domains, carrying the ‘law of serial repetition [...] to ludicrous lengths’ in Oken, according to some.<sup>11</sup> While such a law must lose in determinacy what it gains in extent, the principle behind it is simple: that no product of nature arises in isolation from all other products, each being dependent on others, ‘tak[ing] its starting-point from below’, as Oken notes.<sup>12</sup> How far below, however, must research plunge in order to locate the basal, serially repeated element? Writing retrospectively in 1846, this is what the neurophysiologist Jacob Henlé called the ‘genetic method’, which had as its goal ‘to identify the simple type of a given structure and to trace its progressive elaboration’.<sup>13</sup> Where the genetic researcher is in possession of the fully elaborated organ, the task is

9. *Elements*, xii.

10. As notably discussed by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Nature*, §354 *Zusatz*: ‘Oken, to whom Goethe had communicated the treatise [*On Morphology* 1785], paraded its ideas as his own in a programme he wrote on the subject, and so gained the credit for them.’

11. Edwin Clarke and L.S. Jacyna, *Nineteenth Century Origins of Neuroscientific Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 42.

12. *Elements*, xxiii.

13. Cited in Clark and Jacyna (1987), 21, 43.

simplified; insofar as the basal element of any living organisation is to be encountered within the domain of the biotic, the task becomes simpler still: to find the basal type of all life.

However, if in principle there are no independent products in nature, then the prospect of an end to the genetic typing of any natural product is not to be found in the part, but rather in the whole. Oken's next work will accordingly transform the search for nature's basal elements into the search for 'the nature of nature',<sup>14</sup> or metaphysics.

Combining the results of the *Outline* and *Significance*, Oken's *On the Universe as a Continuation of the Sensory System* (1808) argued 'that the Organism is nothing other than a combination of all the Universe's activities within a single individual body' and that 'World and Organism are one in kind, and do not stand merely in harmony with each other'.<sup>15</sup> The last clause here indicates an important thesis regarding the theory of recapitulation, which does not assert that there merely exists a contingent 'harmony' or phenomenal similarity between parallel series (e.g. world-generation and speciation) that remain of fundamentally different natural orders, but rather that all of nature is involved in the generation of any part of it. Moreover, as evinced by the work's title, Oken is no longer concerned, as he was the *Outline*, to derive merely formal devices from physiological givens, but rather to assert that this structure is *really instantiated* in the universe as such. Accordingly, Oken extended his systematising attention to the elements of physics in *First Ideas towards a Theory of Light, Darkness, Colour and Heat* (1808), where each of these phenomena

14. Novalis, *Werke 2: Die Christenheit oder Europa und andere philosophische Schriften*, ed. Rolf Toman (Köln: Könnemann, 1996), 440.

15. *Elements*, xii.

are derived from tensions, antagonisms and motions in the aether, constituting a 'primitive field theory',<sup>16</sup> and in the *Natural System of Ores* (1809), where mineral particulars are considered for the first time.

While the resultant dynamics fulfilled the post-Kantian brief for physics established especially by Franz von Baader's *Ideas On Rigidity and Fluidity* (1792), Apolph Karl August von Eschenmayer's *Propositions from the Metaphysics of Nature applied to Chemical and Medical Objects* and *Attempt to Derive the Laws of Magnetism A Priori from the Propositions of the Metaphysics of Nature* (both 1797), Oken had also to integrate the phenomena of life into this universal physics. While it is only in the *Elements* that this is achieved, Oken's contribution towards it – the theory of 'primal slime' or protoplasm – was first advanced in *On Generation* (1805), which argued

[...] that all organic beings originate from [...] the infusorial mass, or the protoplasm [*Urschleim*] from whence all larger organisms fashion themselves or are evolved. Their production is therefore nothing else than a regular agglomeration of [...] mucus vesicles or points [*Schleimpunkte*], which first form themselves by their union or combination into particular species.<sup>17</sup>

Since naturephilosophy is to be 'the generative history of the world',<sup>18</sup> rather than that of biological individuals alone, the *Elements* undertakes to synthesise the sensory, cosmogonic, geological, embryological and

16. Pierce C. Mullen, 'The romantic as scientist: Lorenz Oken', *Studies in Romanticism* 16 (1977): 381-99, 388.

17. *Elements*, xi-xii.

18. *Ibid.*, 11.

philosophical systems into a single, self-recapitulating series. The question arises as to how primary the 'primal slime' is. Written prior to the cosmogonic synthesis of *Of the Universe*, Oken's programme in *On Generation* has not yet undertaken the transition to from the physics to the metaphysics of nature. Thus, as briefly digested as the *Elements* is vast (numbering 3652 propositions), Oken describes its project as finally

[...] bring[ing] these different doctrines into mutual connexion, and to show, forsooth, that the Mineral, Vegetable and Animal classes are not to be arbitrarily arranged in accordance with single or isolated characters, but to be based upon the cardinal organs or anatomical systems, from which a firmly established number of classes must of necessity result; moreover, that each of these classes commences or takes its starting-point from below, and consequently that all of them pass parallel to each other.<sup>19</sup>

Yet even here Oken holds out a physicalist solution to the genetic problem, noting that a *parallelism* between the classes make it possible 'to prove that they by no means form a single ascending series'.<sup>20</sup> Although the primacy of primal slime may thus yet be safeguarded, how the *Elements'* project is to be achieved is set out in the opening sections of the work, which introduce the naturephilosophical terms of reference. Amongst the most important of these is the actual and logical priority of natural ground:

Naturephilosophy is the first, philosophy of mind, the second: the former, therefore, is the ground and foundation of the latter,

19. *Elements*, xiii.

20. *Ibid.*



for nature is antecedent to the human mind. [...] Without naturephilosophy, therefore, there is no philosophy of mind, any more than a flower is present without a stem, or an edifice without a foundation.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, since naturephilosophy ‘has to show how, and in accordance indeed with what laws, the material took its origin’, it follows that history forms a single temporal series from the development of matter to particular natures to mind. The formal reason = real ground of existence consists in the various solutions to the problem of ‘how something derived its existence from nothing’.<sup>22</sup>

The other element, then, is Zero, the nothing, and it is introduced in the *Elements* for the first time as *paralleling* the *Urschleim* in biology. In what sense, however, ‘parallel’? Are the biological and the mathematical parallel and thus independent, or does everything depend on ‘what is below it’? The problem of the relative and mobile primacies attaching to the various basal types running throughout Oken’s system is that Zero is the equilibrium point in Oken’s polar philosophy of nature, and is so dominant that it led Steffens to describe Oken’s ‘insurmountable realism’ as complemented only by an ‘ideal element’ that is ‘entirely negative’, a view Knittermeyer endorses.<sup>23</sup> The basal Zero – ‘Oken’s most pervasive principle’ – states that ‘all development proceeds along the same path by adding elements to an original nothingness’, a law that ‘holds for human ontogeny, the historical sequence of species,

21. *Elements* 15-16, t.m.

22. *Ibid.*, 10.

23. *Schelling und die romantische Schule* (op.cit.), 192.

the evolution of the earth itself’.<sup>24</sup> This account certainly follows from the irreversible priority Oken attaches to Nature over Mind; but the problem remains: *either* the Zero is the merely *formal* element Hegel accused Oken’s naturephilosophy as consisting in, in which case ‘The universe’ is *not* ‘the reality of mathematics’;<sup>25</sup> *or* ‘existence derives from nothing’ and Slime is *not primal*. The Okenian solution to the genetic problem therefore consists in a struggle between Nothing and Slime.

### 3. ZERO OR SLIME? THE ELEMENTS OF THE *ELEMENTS* AND THE GROUNDEDNESS OF THE GROUND

The *Elements* outlines its system in sections 18-21 of its ‘Introduction’. The ‘generative history of the world’ divides into three parts:

1. *Mathesis (of the whole),*

from which stem (a) Hylogeny and (b) Theogony, or the generative philosophy of matter and mind;

2. *Ontology (of the singular),*

which follows the generation of nature from Mathesis, and from which stem (a) Cosmogony and (b) Stoichogony; and

3. *Biology (of the whole in the singular),*

which recapitulates the generation of Hylogeny, Theogony and Ontology in embryogenesis.

Mathesis – the *actions* of mathematics, ‘the only true,

24. Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge MA: Bellknap Harvard, 1977), 44, 40.

25. *Elements* 2.

the primary, the universal science<sup>26</sup> – subdivides in turn into the theories of material totalities or Hylogeny, a ‘rather primitive field-theory’<sup>27</sup> comprising aether, light and heat; and of immaterial totalities or Pneumatogeny, a Theogony comprising God and Nothing. Ontology divides into Cosmogony, or the emergence of the cosmic bodies, and Stoichogeny, or how the heavenly bodies ‘divide themselves further [...] into the elements’. Biology, concerned with ‘the whole in singulars [which] is the living or *Organic* [...] divides into *Organogeny*, *Phytosophy* and *Zoosophy*’.<sup>28</sup>

Two things concerning Oken’s conception of Biology are immediately apparent. The first is that it is no longer predicated, as was Oken’s procedure in the *Outline* (1802), on a particular kind of being whose contours are given *in* nature, but rather on a particular stage in the development of structural complexity *involving* God, Nothing and Matter, or mathematics, singulars and substance; that is, the whole of nature. Since the whole is the self-division of God, Nothing and Matter, and the singular is the elemental, hylogenetic singular attained *and actualised* through these divisions; and since further it is articulated primarily by mathematics, then the true object of Biology is the mathematics of these self-divisions as actualised in living somethings. This is the fork in Biological science that leads to the theory of the Primal Slime (*Urschleim*) and its manifestation in Slime Points (*Schleimpunkte*). The theory of slime which forms the oozing ground of Oken’s ‘physio-philosophy’ is ultimately therefore a ‘mathematics endowed with

substance’;<sup>29</sup> or the product of the mathetic-ontogenetic process; the biogenetic process then ‘takes its starting point’ from the ‘infusorial mass’ or ‘primal slime’ *below*, which it divides into the innumerable ‘mucus vesicles [*Schleimpunkte*]’ that are the ‘primal constituent parts of [this] organic mass’. The production of complex singulars (individuals) consists therefore in the ‘agglomeration of infusoria’ up to the level of species.<sup>30</sup> Biology is therefore the science of the production of individuals that has as its basis the science of the production of wholes.

Secondly, if the system that supports this account of the organic is a *true* system, that is, if the philosophy of nature is not merely a reflection upon nature, but rather ‘the generative *history* of the world’;<sup>31</sup> a world that articulates ‘mathematical propositions’ as much as it generates ‘natural things’;<sup>32</sup> then it follows that Biology is no isolated science of abstracted particulars, but rather concerns the developmental singularities by which the mathematicising cosmos is actualised. Hence Oken’s insistence that

Natural History is not a closed department of human knowledge, but presupposes numerous other sciences, such as Anatomy, Physiology, Chemistry and Physics, with even Medicine, Geography and History.<sup>33</sup>

Biology becomes the science it must when and only when the totality of the sciences – of wholes, singulars,

26. *Ibid.*, 24-5

27. Mullen (1977) *Loc.cit.*

28. *Elements*, 21.

29. *Ibid.*, 26.

30. *Ibid.*, xii.

31. *Ibid.*, 11.

32. *Ibid.*, 30.

33. *Ibid.*, xiv.

and singulars-in-wholes – recovers the *entirety* of science as such. This means that Biology recapitulates Mathesis, just as Oken's categories suggest: of the Whole, and of the Whole in the Singular. The *one* science of the whole is mathematics, the language of ontogenesis. From this second perspective, Oken derives what many, including Hegel, deride as the 'empty formalism' of his system, a formalism articulated around an irreducibly ontogenetic element: the 'oscillating Zero', or God: 'God is = + 0 -'.<sup>34</sup> The problem of the relation between the multiplicity of sciences and the 'universal science' arises starkly: *either* there is one universal science to which all others are reducible, *or* Mathesis, the theory of the whole, has no claim to universality, and does not therefore articulate ontogeny. In short: *what is the relation between the Primal Slime and the Zero?* Oken's proposed solution is: mathematics is the universal science that generates, inter-connects, and necessitates all the others. The 'wavering Zero' is the generative core of being and slime.

The problem of priority is a problem for a metaphysically realist natural history precisely because the theory of recapitulation, considered causally, abolishes linear time. Whenever there arise claims to priority (the primal Zero

34. *Elements*, 99. Knittermeyer puts Oken's case economically and concisely: 'God is the father, the generator, but himself ungenerated, transformed into the plus and the minus and yet always remains himself as the existent nothing [*das wesende Nichts*]. God is the son who goes forth from the father into finitude, and he is the mind that takes finitude back, in turn, to the origin and reproduces the "mental bond" with the generating origin. As the first, this divine acting is the 'primary rest [*Urruhe*]', the "wavering and resting point in the universe", the "never appearing and yet ubiquitously present". As the second he is eternal ponentiation and hence, corresponding to the number series  $1 + 2 + \dots + n$ , the creator of the temporal series. As the third, however, God is he who takes back the finite [being] released into the restless time effecting motion and life, into the whole and binds it into him in all-filling space. The formless oscillation of life here receives form and integument. The divine brings itself closer to appearing and therefore materiality.' (Hinrich Knittermeyer, *Schelling und die romantische Schule*. München: Ernst Reinhardt, 1928, 189).

or the Primal Slime), Oken appears to equivocate. Having noted therefore the priority of the philosophy of nature over that of mind in section 15; along with the ontogenetic dependency of the latter on the former ('nature is antecedent to mind') in section 16; section 17 concludes *not* with this serial genetic dependency, but with a 'parallelism' between the two. One section later, however, the parallelism is extended to the relative priorities of the one over the other. Thus:

It will be shown in the sequel that the mental is antecedent to nature. Naturephilosophy must, therefore, commence from the mind.<sup>35</sup>

Which, then, does come first – Zero or Slime? Around what axis is the topology of nature and mind spinning? Does mathematics remain the 'primary science', or is a mathematical realism usurped by a realism concerning natural history? The relation of system and history remains at the core of the metaphysics of natural history; especially as this project was renewed in Prigogine and Stengers new 'physiophilosophical' alliance.<sup>36</sup> What is seldom noted is that this entails a *natural history of metaphysics* that extends beyond the steady accumulation of form that characterises Hegelian history of philosophy. The natural history of metaphysics is a *physics* of metaphysics, a science of the grounds of metaphysics in nature, or a physics of ideation as such. Although sounding more redolent of hard-nosed contemporary eliminativists than of post-Kantian idealists, this recognition was core to *Naturphilosophen* such as

35. *Elements*, 18.

36. Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos* (New York: Bantam, 1984), translation of *La nouvelle alliance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).

Schelling, who characterised philosophy as ‘the natural history of mind’<sup>37</sup> and Troxler, who defines metaphysics as the physics (*Naturlehre*) of human knowledge.<sup>38</sup> If nature is necessary to generate mind, as sections 15 and 16 note, then mind is necessary to the abstract recapitulation of natural production in reflection, or to the recapitulation of the mathetic whole in the biological singular. Yet Oken’s system extends beyond reflection on natural production, since ontogenesis depends on Mathesis. The Platonic kinship is unmistakable:<sup>39</sup> mathematics, or the Idea, are not simply nominal or formal processes, but rather ontogenetic. Just as the *Phaedo* argues<sup>40</sup> that it is *because* of the form of Beauty that beautiful things exist, so Oken argues that it is *because* of Mathesis that things exist, or because of Nothing (= 0) that there are beings. That Oken inverts the causal or physical dependency of mind on nature does indeed stem from his characterisation of Mathesis as hylogeny *and* *theogony*, which gives *direction* to the system, towards the production of animals capable of Mathesis and therefore, famously, of man:

Man is the summit, the crown of nature’s development, and must comprehend everything that has preceded him [while] man is a complex of all that surrounds him, namely, of element, mineral, plant and animal.<sup>41</sup>

37. F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30; *SW* 2: 39.

38. Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler, *Naturlehre des menschlichen Erkennens oder Metaphysik* (Hamburg: Meiner [1828] 1998).

39. As Mullen (1977: 388) notes, ‘In form and to some extent in substance [the *Elements*] closely resembles Plato’s *Timaeus*.’

40. *Phaedo*, 100d.

41. *Elements*, 12, 98.

At the very point where *thinking slime* affords nature linearity, however, at the crown of its development from elements to animals, directionality reverses. Mathesis as theogony is concerned with the immaterial whole; yet what is the ‘immaterial’? Merely ‘that which is nothing in relation to the material’,<sup>42</sup> just as ‘God is = + 0 –’<sup>43</sup> or ‘the eternal is the nothing of nature’.<sup>44</sup> The ‘immaterial’ is the zero of material, its generative ground, just as God is that of nature, since nothing iterated is the becoming of something. Thus the sense in which ‘something derives its existence from nothing’<sup>45</sup> now becomes ‘very clear’. Just as

numbers have not issued forth from zero as if they had previously resided therein, but the zero has emerged out of itself [...], and then it was a finite zero, a number<sup>46</sup>

so something emerges not ‘out of’ but rather from the *acts of the nothing’s* self-extensions: ‘Zero is [...] the primary act [and] numbers are [its] repetitions’.<sup>47</sup> Thus another primary whose ‘positing and negating are called realisation [which] is a process of extension taking place in the Idea’.<sup>48</sup> And this positing *and negating* takes place, equally, in the ‘highest, most exalted art [...] of war’,<sup>49</sup> reducing everything to

42. *Elements*, 8.

43. *Ibid.*, 99.

44. *Ibid.*, 44.

45. *Ibid.*, 10.

46. *Ibid.*, 37.

47. *Ibid.*, 55, 57.

48. *Ibid.*, 48, 38.

49. *Ibid.*, 3652.



nothing after the Napoleonic model. The nothing initiates a ceaseless *imitatio nihil* amidst the extended multiplicities formed of the infinite repetition of the primary act, while existence resists the sink at its core.

At first sight far from satisfactory, all this wavering Nothing leaves an ontological queasiness in place of any principle of sufficient reason. It pervades Oken's system, with its martial apex. For what kind of biologist does war supercede life as the system's goal? That the complexifications of Primal Slime here cede to the destruction of war demonstrates that the cosmos worships the Nothing-God. The culmination of Biology is the destruction of individuals, which is held in check so long as there remains *something*. Kant tells us, reassuringly enough, that reality can never sink to zero; but Oken's *mehylothegony* supplants all Being with increase and decrease, *each limitless*. The fragile hold of beings is secured by Slime alone – all that ontology can hope for is Slime potentiated and negated into and out of all things. The question thus arises is this: is the *Urschleim* – or, ontically speaking, the *Schleimpunkte* – negable, reducible, as well as 'potentiable'? The prospect of the *contingency of all beings* issues directly from this as it were gravitational distortion of the local spacetime of their generation.

The question would hold no terror were the passage from mathetic metheology to ontology secured, e.g. by a causal or a linear-progressive process; but it is not. The whole is not left behind by history, by the accumulation of causes from whence emerges time; rather, it *returns* in Biology. Oken's Biology is *not* therefore testimony to the final discovery of a 'Newton of the blade of grass', of an organicism to save us from the ravages of nature, but

only the repetition of the None-All in every generated particular.

All directionality, whether in ideation or cosmogeny, in embryogenesis, hylogeny, temporalisation or primary Mathesis, is withdrawn in favour of the *polar* model that determines the ‘primitive field theory’ Oken constructs around the tensions, antitheses and motions of the aether in the *First Ideas for a Theory of Light*, and which inherits and extends the galvanic process Ritter discovered to ‘constantly accompany the animal kingdom’ into the mineral, chemical and mathetic domains along the lines suggested by the magnetic schema, in which the zero is not primitive, but first and last in, and the principle of, all the extensions of its force.<sup>50</sup> Oken’s multiplicity of primaries – act, slime, rest, etc. – are primary relative *both* to the lower nothing from which, at ontogenetic root, they issue, and to the ‘higher zeros’ that counteract them which they in turn give rise: rest, war, act.

The polar metaphysics of nature, therefore, collapses the axis of higher and lower, antecedence and succession, into a field theory of polar dependency: ‘The world is God rotating’ or ‘a rotating globe of matter’.<sup>51</sup> Natural history is always therefore *relative* to the mathetic zero from which its

50. The schema owes its most definitive account to Karl August Eschenmayer’s *Attempt to Deduce the Laws of Magnetic Phenomena a priori from the Propositions of Metaphysics* (1797), and to Schelling’s reworking of it in his *Exposition of my System of Philosophy* (1801). For Eschenmayer, see Jörg Jantzen, ‘Adolph Karl August von Eschenmayer’, in Bach and Breidbach, eds., *op.cit.*, 153-79 and Gilles Châtelet, *Les enjeux du mobile. Mathématique, physique et philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), esp. 137-9. On Schelling’s transformation of the magnetic schema in his so-called Identity philosophy, see Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006), 158-82, and ‘The physics of the world soul’, in Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman, eds. *The New Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2004), 128-50.

51. *Elements* 142, 161.

objects issue, and the frame of reference is always generated *after* the field that is its object. The ultimate significance of sections 15, 16 and 18 of the *Elements* is therefore that the priority of nature with respect to mind generates a nothing in nature from which naturephilosophy begins. Ironically, Oken’s post-Kantian solutions make Lambert’s physico-critical intervention redundant by *realising the full consequences of self-effecting processes*: the elimination of history in nature: ‘Time is the infinite succession of numbers or the mathematical nothings’.<sup>52</sup> We turn now to Oken’s solutions to his polar take on the genetic problem.

#### 4. OKENIAN SOLUTIONS, AND ...

Oken’s solution to the genetic problem is not what Henlé’s ‘student of the nervous system’ might have hoped for. Rather than identifying the ‘basal element’ of neurogenetic recapitulation, Oken resolves individuation into the whole. Schematically:

- (1) *Mathesis* → *Ontogenesis* → *Biogenesis* → *the production of the whole in the singular* → *Mathesis potentiated*.
- (2) The consequence of this is that the causal series that ties time to change is sacrificed for a codependency relation, a reciprocity, between the elements recapitulating the basic scheme of the whole in a singular. ‘The law of causality is a law of polarity’, not of time.<sup>53</sup> Time, Oken continues, is accordingly ‘only repetition, and thus also a suppression of

52. *Elements* 72.

53. *Ibid.*, 79.

[...] positions'.<sup>54</sup> Because the whole is expressed at the apexes of individuation (Ideation and War), Okenian ontogenesis produces irreducibly local maps, while 'pneumatogenesis' has *primally and then derivatively* multiplied them. Potentiation is potentiation of the whole in its individuation, as Schelling would later note of the involutive-evolutive process.<sup>55</sup>

- (3) If, logically, mathematics is the expression of the whole in the individual; and if, theogonically, 'God = + 0 – is before and after all things', then modally, only the nothing is necessary. Here, then, we derive the central lesson of Oken's system of nature: the contingency of all beings, so the 'principle of sufficient reason' is satisfied by *nothing* potentiated. Precisely in consequence of this, mathematics or mehylogeny does not so much *supplant* nature as *generate* it: by taking on the project of the 'natural history of metaphysics', Oken's slimy Platonic naturephilosophy has mathetic functions accreting numbers and organs, indifferently: 'all development', as Gould notes of Oken's system, 'begins with a primal zero and progresses to complexity by the successive *addition* of organs in a determined sequence'.<sup>56</sup> The zero accretes by self-extension in the forms of mineral, chemical, plant and animal organs.<sup>57</sup>

54. Ibid., 74.

55. See Schelling's *Stuttgart Private Lectures* (1810; *SW* VIII), in Thomas Pfau, ed. *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by Schelling* (Albany NY: SUNY, 1994).

56. Gould, *op.cit.*, 40.

57. *Elements*, 867.

- (4) If, as we have seen, recapitulation becomes, by virtue of (2), above, if not *aionic* (although Oken occasionally makes precisely this point: 'Zero must be endlessly self-positing, for in every respect it is indefinite or unlimited, eternal'),<sup>58</sup> then certainly *achronic*. It forms the logic of Idea in the hylogenetic → biogenetic process, and as such is the repeated intercession of the eternal into time, or its negation.
- (5) Even anthropogenesis, so often criticised as the 'anti-copernican' core of the post-Kantian 'restoration', accordingly suffers. No sooner is man declared the 'highest', insofar as it is through man that nature achieves Ideation and thus *reproduces Mathesis*, than war erupts because 'the Nothing is higher than the highest': 'the Zero, the highest'.<sup>59</sup> Oken therefore demonstrates that anthropogenesis culminates neither in the humanism of finitude nor in the ontolotheological eschatology, but rather ceaselessly repeats the *mathetic mehylotheogony* of the cosmogonic process:

In the process of destruction, the finite being seeks to become the universe itself [because] man is a complex of all that surrounds him.<sup>60</sup>

58. *Elements* 53.

59. Ibid., 40.

60. Ibid., 91, 98.

## 5. ... POST-OKENIAN PROBLEMS.

The continuance of Being is a continuous positing of the Eternal, or of nothing, a ceaseless process of becoming real in that which is not. There exists nothing but nothing, nothing but the Eternal, and all individual existence is only a fallacious existence. All individual things are monads, nothings, which have, however, become determined.<sup>61</sup>

We have noted that the Okenian number series are primary, and issue from a primary Zero, 'the one essence of all things, the 0, the highest identity'.<sup>62</sup> Disregarding for the moment the metaphysics of polar time, the Zero is, if not primitive, then ultimate, insofar as everything resolves into it. Oken invests considerable effort in the elaboration of zero.

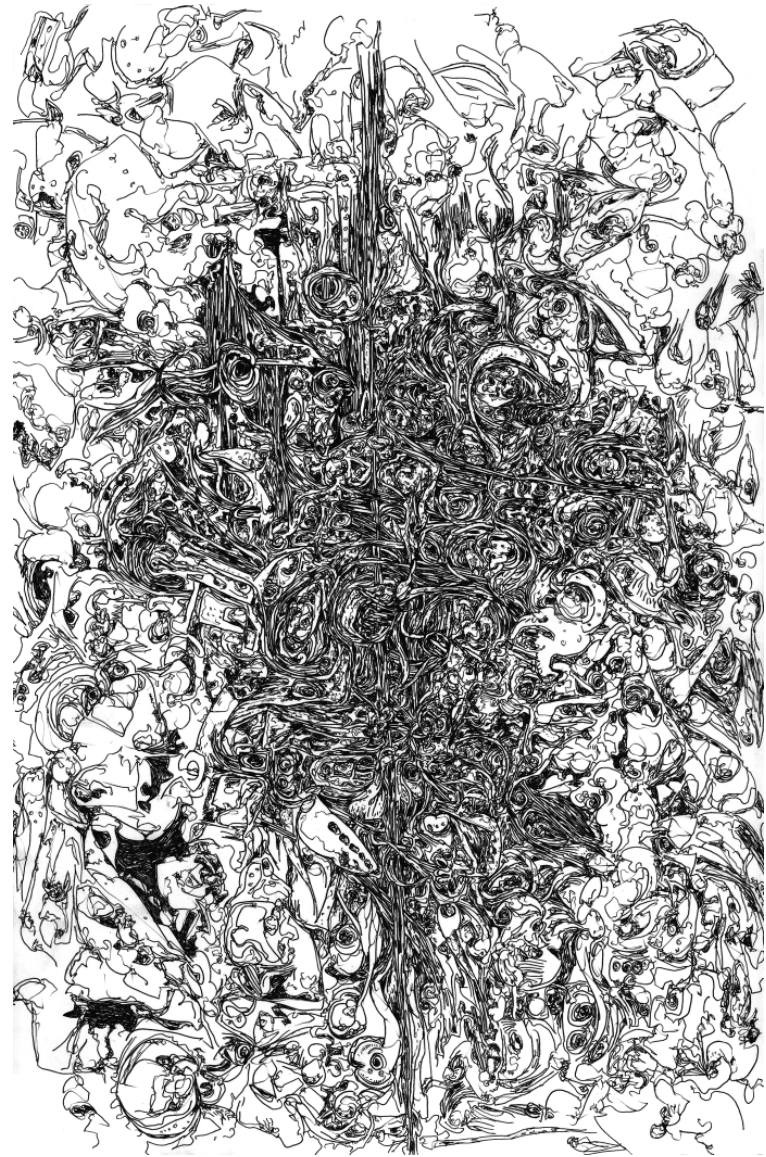
Firstly, it is twofold: intensive or ideal, and extensive or real. Yet these two remain indifferent: 'the real and the ideal are no more different than ice and water; both [...] are essentially one and the same'.<sup>63</sup> This is where the repeatedly claimed similarity of Oken's Zero and Schelling's reformulated law of Identity are apparent:<sup>64</sup> that identity is the

61. *Ibid.*, 58.

62. *Ibid.*, 40.

63. *Ibid.*, 36.

64. This tendency starts with Oken's translator, Tulk: 'the present work stands alone in Germany, as being the most practical application upon a systematic scale of the principles advanced by Schelling, more especially in the *Mathesis and Ontology*' (*Elements* vi). More recently, Joseph L. Esposito, in *Schelling's Idealism and the Philosophy of Nature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977, 143) repeats the point: 'Essentially Oken's system is the same as Schelling's, but with specific scientific disciplines superimposed on it, so that it became at once a picture of the World System and a proposal for how to study it. [...] *Mathesis* is the condition of Schelling's Absolute Identity, wherein the first differentiation occurs'. See also Wolfgang Förster, 'Schelling als Theoretiker der Dialektik der Natur', in Hans Jörg Sandkühler, ed.,



ground of differentiation, and that no differentia, insofar as they are different, are identical.

Secondly, the susceptibility of Zero to ‘infinitely numerous forms’<sup>65</sup> invites speculation as to the other forms it has in fact assumed: apart from Eschenmayer’s magnetic schema, therefore, Kant’s account of the eliminative actions of negative magnitudes, or the ontological problem of negative numbers, pinion around zeros, as does the ‘minimax’ of zero sum games, or the empty set from which Russell and Whitehead, on the one hand, and Badiou on the other, draw such diverse ontological conclusions. Finally, and perhaps decisively, the ungenerated and ungenerable, non-phenomenal attributes of the Platonic Idea make it into the zero of the physical world, a series of problems best explored in the *Parmenides*. The actual and potential permutability of zero into many formal schemas brings Oken’s theorizing out of the domain of the ‘number mysticism’ of which he has been routinely accused<sup>66</sup> to demonstrate the ontological vitality of the problem of the relation of number, being and animal.<sup>67</sup> The question Badiou raises against Deleuze of the separability of mathematics and ontology, on the one hand, from nature on the other, is, as is topologically appropriate, twisted in Oken. *On the one hand*, Mathesis, ontology and biology form

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*Natur und geschichtlicher Prozess. Studien zur Naturphilosophie F.W.J. Schellings.* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 188, and Ghiselin, *loc. cit.*, 439.

65. *Elements* 40.

66. Ghiselin, *loc.cit.*, 440.

67. See Alain Badiou, ‘Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*’, in Constantine Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski, eds., *Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 51-69 and my discussion of it in relation to these problems, in *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, 8ff.

distinct domains that are all, *on the other*, articulated by their respective and interrelated zeros. In other words, each series takes its starting point from its predecessor, so that Mathesis entails ontology entails biology. The problem of the independent dependence of series one on the other is in effect the problem solved by the generation of nature itself, insofar as it recapitulates these series in all its products. On Oken’s evidence, then, number is inseparable from animal precisely because *animals are the numbers of nature*.<sup>68</sup> ‘life’, he writes, ‘is a mathematical problem’.<sup>69</sup> Mathesis, ontology and biology are equally inseparable, therefore, because the series are not statically taxonomic, but actually genetic. *It is the genetic element in Oken that indicates a resolution to the contemporary problem.*

Thirdly, the Ideal and Real forms correspond to the Zero in a state of intensity and extensity in number series. ‘The latter’, writes Oken, ‘is only expanded intensity, the former, extensity concentrated in the point’.<sup>70</sup> It is this latter differentiation that provides Oken with the means to formulate the issuing forth of something out of the nothing by way of the latter’s repetition rather than its expulsion of a latent content.

The Zero thus provides a genuine solution to the problem of sufficient reason: *nothing* is the reason why there are beings, or is the ungrounding of primary ground from which grounds emerge. This thesis is rich in implications: firstly, since the determination of nothing occurs only in

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68. I owe this point to lengthy and unforgettable conversations with my colleague Sean Watson.

69. *Elements*, 104.

70. *Ibid.*, 37.

the process of extension and concentration, and since it is susceptible to 'infinitely numerous forms', it grounds *the contingency of all beings*, although it ought not to be omitted that it *grounds* this contingency of singulars. Secondly, if all things have one essence (= 0; *Elements* 40), then in what sense are all things really diverse? If merely *formally* (as Oken in fact argues), then ontology – the *actual* generation of singulars – cannot fulfill its function, and the All remains = 0; if *essentially*, then the Zero ceases to be the primitive = the highest in all things, and the All is not = 0. The problem this poses can thus be summatively stated: is the Zero capable of real generation? Since Oken answers that 'naturephilosophy is the generative history' or 'the science of the genesis of the world',<sup>71</sup> the formal and essential 'generations' of zero must be essentially indifferent while formally different. If, however, all difference is formal difference, and the Zero is always the generating (potentiable and negable) element, then it must either be concluded that formal difference is essentially indifferent or that formal differentiation is the generation of an additional mode *not given* in the alternatives. This, indeed, is Oken's solution: 'positing and negating the Eternal is called realisation'.<sup>72</sup>

What does the contingency of all beings therefore entail? That the formal differentiation and essential indifference of the generations of zeros never attain to fixity, whether of species, phyla or morphology. Indeed, this is guaranteed by the endlessly rotating axes of theogonic and hylogenic nature,<sup>73</sup> just as it is by Oken's 'singular to

71. *Ibid.*, 11, 66.

72. *Ibid.*, 40.

73. cf. *Elements* 142, 161.

whole' transformation of the genetic problem. Accordingly, Oken's is a universal morphogenesis, which earned his work credit from D'Arcy Thompson<sup>74</sup> and E.S. Russell,<sup>75</sup> amongst others. Okenian ontology does not therefore so much chart whole entities, but rather *singulars*, both in the sense of *cosmogony*, or the generation of the *one* universe – 'there can be only *one* nature';<sup>76</sup> and of *stoichogeny*, or the generation of the elements and organs that accrete to the various *formally differentiated* singulars. Ceaselessly oscillating around the zeros from which they issue and the complexes they recapitulate, depending on the extensity of the zeros' generations, the emergent material forms are not so much limited geometries as they are limited *acts*.

Taking these points together, it becomes evident that what the contingency conferred upon beings by Oken's principle of sufficient reason consists in is the consequence of the contingency of dynamics. On this account, biology is the science of the contingent dynamics of the primal slime, oscillating between the achievement of Ideation and mineral inertia. Indeed, the polar field thus generated by biology *involves* rocks as much as Ideas, as much as the biological singular involves the osseous and the nervous systems; all biological systems, however, are *evolved* from the slimy,

74. D'Arcy Thompson cites Oken twice by name in *On Growth and Form* [1917]. Ed & abridged by J.T. Bonner. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), and gives the following, Okenian account of morphology: 'Morphology is not only a study of material things and of the forms of material things, but has its dynamical aspect, under which we deal with the interpretation, in terms of force, of the operations of Energy', 14.

75. E.S. Russell, in *Form and Function: a Contribution to the History of Animal Morphology* (London: John Murray, 1916), 90, thus describes Oken as 'a careful student of embryology'. The most recent exponent of the positive view of Okenian morphology is Stephen J. Gould, *op. cit.*

76. *Elements*, 166.

protoplasmic mass whose contingencies are *involved* in them. To return to the problem of the separability of mathematics and nature, we must now pose it the other way round: *is a slime-free matheme possible?* Morphology, with its principle of sufficient reason, argues not.

## 6. CONCLUSION: THE ROTATIONS OF THE BEFORE AND THE AFTER

With Schelling, we argued at the beginning of this essay that the *ethical process* is possible only if the ‘shock of the objective world’ can be abstracted away. One means of achieving this is by insisting on the separability of mathematics and nature, and by insisting on the ‘impossibility’ of a philosophy of nature, as does Badiou.<sup>77</sup> Another means of achieving this is by insisting on the insuperability of the nominal frameworks of self-conscious, finite reason. Since the latter is a subdivision of the former, however, there is no difference in kind, but only in degree, between these two means of abstracting the world.

Oken’s insistence, by contrast, on the material world of nature as forming the generative basis not only of natural individuation, but also of the thought-series that can only arise on their basis in turn, suggests that one more entailment might flow from his principle of sufficient reason: the order of priority of nature and mind. With this order, the shock of conjoint time and change by which Lambert forced the progressive splintering of the system of transcendental philosophy, is reintroduced: if there is an order of priority, how can it be grounded given the ceaseless rotation of Matter and God? To resolve this merely formally, by arguing that

77. Badiou, *loc.cit.*, 64.

Matter is the zero of God, just as God is the zero of Matter, is not to resolve the problem at all, but to avoid it, since Mathesis consists precisely in the formal differentiation of Matter and God – of hylogeny and theogony – from which ontogenesis flows. Further, we have already noted Oken’s inversion of his initially stated order of priority: ‘nature first, mind second’<sup>78</sup> becomes ‘mind first, nature second’.<sup>79</sup> Since we must concede that Oken’s dynamics admit of no transcendent or transcendental axes, therefore, the grounds of the before and the after must be established by other means.

Ultimately, as Oken repeatedly argues, the task of naturephilosophy is ‘to show how [...] the Material took its origin; and therefore, how something derived its existence from nothing’.<sup>80</sup> By now we recognise this as Oken’s trademark, polar procedure: matter and nothing are conjointly the first focus of the systematic task of generating nature *in thought*. Thought, in other words, *involves* matter and nothing, i.e., the whole (Mathesis). Indeed, philosophy and war are the latest of the zero’s accretions, the former consisting always in ‘the repetition of the origin of the world’,<sup>81</sup> while the latter, through the ‘process of destruction’, seeks to reestablish the essential identity of everything<sup>82</sup> in the zero that must necessarily remain. Each involves the entire universe and its generation; the first as universal repetition, the second as universal equation. War reveals the ground, and philosophy repeats its generations, up to

78. *Elements*, 15-16.

79. *Ibid.*, 18.

80. *Ibid.*, 10.

81. *Ibid.*, 2.

82. *Ibid.*, 91.



and including its own generation in nature. Because ground supersedes its repetition, which precedes its revelation, an order of priority can be established *in thought*. Hence Oken: 'Time is the act of numbering; numbering is thinking; thinking is time.'<sup>83</sup>

This is not to argue that time exists *only* in thought, in the Kantian manner, but rather that, as Oken notes, thinking is time. This is because

Time itself is only repetition [...] The vicissitude of things is in fact time; if there be no change, there is also no time.<sup>84</sup>

In other words, because the grounding of existents consists in the repetition of zero, this grounding extends to Ideation, to philosophy. Philosophy is the *formal* repetition of cosmogony, while war is its *essential* repetition. Because Ideation is not itself the ground of time (Kant), but time that of Ideation, the grounding of existents in nothing establishes the a priority of nature with respect to mind, but without segregating mind from any part of nature or Mathesis. The principle of sufficient reason therefore states: *something emerges from nothing*, and this process is inviolable.

Oken's natural history of metaphysics therefore indicates that naturephilosophy is not simply *a* means, but the *necessary* means by which post-Kantian philosophy escapes the trap that the ethical process sets for it: the primacy of nature extends even to those slimy neural accretions to the primal Zero that make metaphysics possible.

83. *Elements*, 75.

84. *Ibid.*, 74.

Poems XVII

Steven Shearer

Charcoal on rag paper, each 48 x 35 inches, 2007.  
(Facing Page: InstallationView of *Poems*, Berlin 2006.)



AROUSSED BY ABRUPT STENCH OF  
MOLECULAR DISEMBOWELMENT  
NOCTILUCENT LUBRICANT RAIN  
SPASMODIC CONSECRATION  
TOWERS OF LIMBS AND FEVERS  
SPIRITUAL FECULENCE  
DRUNKEN SODOMYTHIC DEICIDE  
SEPTIC CHRIST RESURRECTION  
ENSHRINED INTO ABUSE  
FEEDING OFF UNHOLY GROWTH  
SOLAR EXECUTION ECLIPSE  
MASTURBATE UPON THRONE OF  
PNEUMATIC DESECRATION  
WRECKAGE IN COLD FLESH

MAJESTIC ELDERLY WASTE  
SKULLFUCKING DEMENTIA  
ENDLESS BLEEDING JOURNEY  
FOUNTAINS OF GOAT SEMEN  
COPROPHAGIC COMMUNION  
BEATEN MOCKED CRUCIFIED  
WELL OF ALL HUMAN TEARS  
APOCALYPSE INSIDE  
DARK GLEAM OF OBSCURITY  
TRIUMPHANT SICKNESS  
FROZEN HOLOCAUST CLOUDS  
MARCHING TO MY SEPULTURE  
JEHOVAH DESECRATION  
EXQUISITE SEXUAL VOMIT

ELECTRONIC APPARITION  
UNHOLY DEATH AFTER DEATH  
SCULPTING THE UNCLEAN  
GOATVOMIT TRANSFUSION  
PARASITES IN GARDEN OF CHRIST  
FLOWERING DECIMATIONS  
DEFILED IN PUTRID SILENCE  
ABORTUM ABRUPTION  
FUCKING UNHOLY OBSCURITY  
MISCREATION OF FUSED FLESH  
PERISHING BLACK LIGHT  
SUICIDAL INSTINCTS  
MIRRORS OF SUFFOCATION  
RESURRECTION IN RECTUM

HIGH ON FORMALDEHYDE  
EXHAUSTED CENTURY  
BLOOD OF CHAOS CONSUMED  
DRAPED IN PUTRID FLESH  
SYMPHONIC GOATSODOMY  
INFECTED CADAVER FLOWS  
CRUCIFIED HUMILIATION  
EXTREME TRUTH OF CARNAGE  
ABHORRED DESPISER  
SODOMASTICATE THE LIFELESS  
ENDLESS HALLS OF SUFFERING  
PRAYING AND DECOMPOSING  
SCRIPTURAL PERVERSIONS  
CLOSE YOUR FUCKING BOOK

RAPED OF YOUR RELIGION  
SUPREME ANCIENT SANCTUM  
NECROCADAVERIC RUMPUS  
MORBID NUN IMPREGNATOR  
CEASELESS RAMPAGE  
ODIOUS HARLEQUIN FETUS  
TAKE OATH OF BLACK BLOOD  
CRUCIFIXION SKULL CHALICE  
FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROT  
MACABRE EXECUTIONS  
MOLEST THE CIRCLE OF LIFE  
DROWNING IN AFTERBIRTH  
CHRISTIAN COMPOST  
AS SEMEN BLENDS WITH ASH

DISEMBOWELMENT OF THRONE  
APOCALYPTIC THORACOPAGUS  
MARCHING TO WINTER BATTLE  
SACRIFICED UNDER PENTAGRAM  
HEDONISTIC CARVING  
SPECTRUM OF AGGRESSION  
PLACENTOPHAGIC GORGING  
FOUL SLUMBER OF BAPHOMETH  
COVERED WITH DARKNESS  
SPIRITUAL MOLESTATION  
CANNIBALISM FROM WOMB  
HALO OF BURNING WINGS  
REBIRTH IN ROTTED GALLOWS  
GOATFUCKING REHEARSAL

JESUS AUTOPSY EUPHORIA  
CHAINS OF CHRISTIAN FILTH  
BLEED UPON THE CROSS  
BEHEADED AND SANCTIFIED  
CEREMONIAL DARKNESS  
STRIPPED OF MY FOUL FLESH  
EXHUMED NECROMESSIAH  
SOLSTICE OF OPPRESSION  
FRENETIC GOAT WORSHIP  
CLOTTED LIGHT OF ODIUM  
CEREMONIAL EMBRYOMUTATION  
GRACELESS CRUEL NOISE  
PROFANATICA ABRUPTUS  
BAPTIZED IN VOMIT OF PRIEST

## Singular Agitations and a Common Vertigo

Keith Tilford

- p335. *Graft*, ink on paper, 114.3cm x 76.2cm, 2004
- p343. *Chatterbox*, ink on paper, 106.7cm x 76.2cm, 2004
- p347. *Untitled*, ink, marker and eraser on colour plate,  
22.5cm x 18.7cm, 2008
- p352. *Untitled*, ink, marker and eraser on colour plate,  
26cm x 20.3cm, 2008
- p358. *Negative Machinery*, ink on paper,  
121.9cm x 121.9cm, 2005
- p361. *Untitled*, ink, marker and eraser on colour plate,  
28.6cm x 20.3cm, 2008
- p364. *Untitled*, ink on bristol board,  
58.4cm x 73.7cm, 2004

## On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl

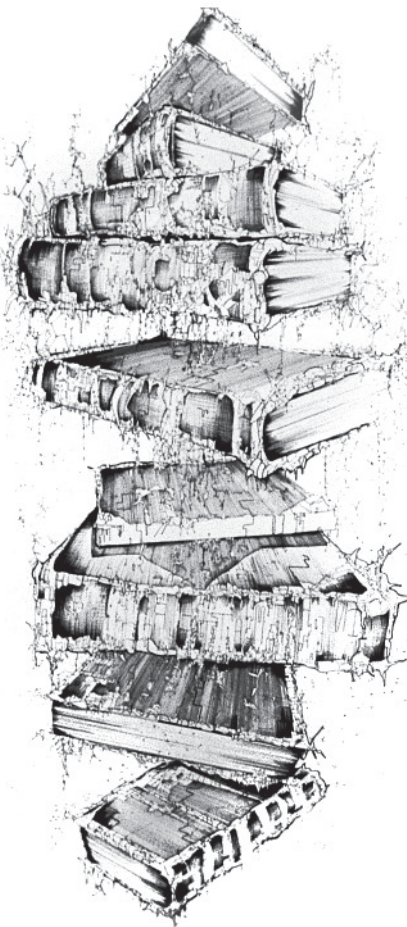
Graham Harman

In a dismissive review of a recent anthology on Schelling, Andrew Bowie accuses two authors of a style he ‘increasingly’ thinks of as ‘continental science fiction’.<sup>1</sup> There is room for further increase in Bowie’s thinking. With his implication that science fiction belongs to the juvenile or the unhinged, Bowie enforces a sad limitation on mental experiment. For nothing resembles science fiction more than philosophy does – unless it be science itself. From its dawning in ancient Greece, philosophy has been the asylum of strange notions: a cosmic justice fusing opposites into a restored whole; a series of emanations from fixed stars to the moon to the prophets; divine intervention in the

1. Andrew Bowie, ‘Something old, something new ...’, in *Radical Philosophy* 128 (November/December 2004), 46. The review is of *The New Schelling*, J. Norman & A. Welchman (eds.) (London: Continuum, 2004). The targets of Bowie’s censure are Iain Hamilton Grant and Alberto Toscano.

movement of human hands and legs; trees and diamonds with infinite parallel attributes, only two of them known; insular monads sparkling like mirrors and attached to tiny bodies built from chains of other monads; and the eternal recurrence of every least event. While the dismal consensus that such speculation belongs to the past is bolstered by the poor imagination of some philosophers, it finds no support among working scientists, who grow increasingly wild in their visions. Even a cursory glance at the physics literature reveals a discipline bewitched by strange attractors, degenerate topologies, black holes filled with alternate worlds, holograms generating an illusory third dimension, and matter composed of vibrant ten-dimensional strings. Mathematics, unconstrained by empirical data, has long been still bolder in its gambles. Nor can it be said that science fiction is a marginal feature of literature itself. Long before the mighty crabs and squids of Lovecraft and the tribunals of Kafka, we had Shakespeare's witches and ghosts, Mt. Purgatory in the Pacific, the Cyclops in the Mediterranean, and the Sphinx tormenting the north of Greece.

Against the model of philosophy as a rubber stamp for common sense and archival sobriety, I would propose that philosophy's sole mission is *weird realism*. Philosophy must be realist because its mandate is to unlock the structure of the world itself; it must be weird because reality is weird. 'Continental science fiction', and 'continental horror', must be transformed from insults into a research program. It seems fruitful to launch this program with a joint treatment of Edmund Husserl and H.P. Lovecraft, an unlikely pair that I will try to render more likely. The dominant strand of twentieth-century continental thought stems from the



phenomenology of Husserl, whose dry and affable works conceal a philosophy tinged with the bizarre. In almost the same period, the leading craftsman of horror and science fiction in literature was Lovecraft, recently elevated from pulp author to canonical classic by the prestigious *Library of America* series.<sup>2</sup> The road to continental science fiction leads through a Lovecraftian reading of phenomenology. This remark is not meant as a prank. Just as Lovecraft turns prosaic New England towns into the battleground of extradimensional fiends, Husserl's phenomenology converts simple chairs and mailboxes into elusive units that emit partial, contorted surfaces. In both authors, the broken link between objects and their manifest crust hints at 'such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age'<sup>3</sup> – or preferably, revive a metaphysical speculation that embraces the permanent strangeness of objects. If philosophy is weird realism, then a philosophy should be judged by what it can tell us about Lovecraft. In symbolic terms, Great Cthulhu should replace Minerva as the patron spirit of philosophers, and the Miskatonic must dwarf the Rhine and the Ister as our river of choice. Since Heidegger's treatment of Hölderlin resulted mostly in pious, dreary readings, philosophy needs a new literary hero.

2. H.P. Lovecraft, *Tales* (New York: The Library of America, 2005).

3. *Ibid.*, 167. From the famous first paragraph of 'The Call of Cthulhu.'

### LOVECRAFT'S MATERIALISM

In the great tales of Lovecraft we find a mythology centered in New England, but ranging from the Antarctic to Pluto as well. Humans are no longer lords of the cosmos, but are surrounded by hidden monstrosities who evade or corrupt our race, sometimes plotting its downfall. 'The Old Ones', or 'Those Ones', are the disturbing general terms by which these creatures are known. They vastly exceed us in mental and physical prowess, yet occasionally interbreed with human females, preferring women of a decayed genetic type. The least encounter with the Old Ones often results in mental breakdown, and all reports of dealings with them are hushed. But their unspeakable powers are far from infinite. To achieve their aims, the Old Ones seek minerals in the hills of Vermont, infiltrate churches in seaport towns, and pursue occult manuscripts under the eyes of suspicious librarians. Their researches are linked not only with Lovecraft's fictional authors and archives (the mad Arab al-Hazred, Miskatonic University), but real ones as well (Pico della Mirandola, Harvard's Widener Library). Their corpses are carried away by floods, and even the mighty Cthulhu explodes, though briefly, when rammed by a human-built ship. There are also rivalries between the monsters, as becomes clear in 'At the Mountains of Madness'. The powers of the various Old Ones are no more uniform than they are infinite.

This balance in the monsters between power and frailty is mentioned to oppose any *Kantian* reading of Lovecraft. Such a reading is understandable, since Kant's inaccessible noumenal world seems a perfect match for the cryptic stealth of Lovecraft's creatures. His descriptions of their

bodies and actions are almost deliberately insufficient, and seem to allude to dimensions beyond the finite conditions of human perception. His monsters are not just mysterious, but often literally invisible; they undermine our stock of emotional responses and zoological categories. The very architecture of their cities mocks the principles of Euclidean geometry. A few examples will indicate the style:

When a traveler in north central Massachusetts takes the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury Pike [...] he comes upon a lonely and curious country [...] Gorges and ravines of problematical depth intersect the way, and the crude wooden bridges always seem of dubious safety. When the road dips again there are stretches of marshland that one instinctively dislikes [...]<sup>4</sup>

Odd wounds or sores, having something of the aspect of incisions, seemed to inflict the visible cattle [...]<sup>5</sup>

[Wilbur Whateley] would sometimes mutter an unfamiliar jargon, and chant in bizarre rhythms which chilled the listener with a sense of unexplainable terror.<sup>6</sup>

And most compellingly:

It would be trite and not wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe [the dead creature on the floor], but one may properly say that it could not be vividly visualized by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound up with the life-forms of this planet and of the three known dimensions.<sup>7</sup>

4. Ibid., 370-1. Italics added.

5. Ibid., 375-6. Italics added.

6. Ibid., 379. Italics added.

7. Ibid., 389. Italics added.

At the climax of ‘The Dunwich Horror’, when Curtis Wheateley briefly glimpses the formerly hidden creature on the mountaintop, he describes it as made of squirming ropes, shaped somewhat like a hen’s egg, with dozens of legs like barrels that shut halfway as it walks – a jelly-like creature having nothing solid about it, with great bulging eyes and ten or twenty mouths, somewhat grey in color with blue or purple rings, and a ‘half-face’ on top.<sup>8</sup> In the later tale ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, the vast Antarctic city displays ‘no architecture known to man [...] with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of known geometrical laws.’<sup>9</sup> When this dead metropolis is first sighted from the air, the narrator assumes it must be a polar mirage:

There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped discs; and strange, beetling, table-like constructions suggesting piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars [...] There were composite cones and pyramids either alone or surmounting cylinders and cubes or flatter truncated cones and pyramids, and occasional needle-like spires in curious clusters of five. All of these febrile structures seemed knit together by tubular bridges [...].<sup>10</sup>

The near-incoherence of such descriptions undercuts any attempt to render them in visual form. The very *point* of the descriptions is that they fail, hinting only obliquely at some unspeakable substratum of reality. It is obvious why this might seem Kantian in its implications.

8. Ibid., 409-10.

9. Ibid., 508.

10. Ibid., 508-9.

Nonetheless, the Kantian reading fails. Even if we accepted a metaphysics splitting the world into noumenal and phenomenal realms, there is no question that the Old Ones would belong entirely to the phenomenal. The mere fact of invisibility is surely not enough to qualify the monsters as noumenal. The so-called Higgs boson of present-day physics, assuming it exists, lies beyond the gaze of current particle accelerators. No one has ever witnessed the core of the earth, or the center of the Milky Way which may or may not be home to a massive black hole. Countless other forces must exist in the universe that could be only decades away from discovery, while others will remain shielded from human insight in perpetuity. But this does not make them noumenal: these forces, however bizarre, would still belong to the causal and spatio-temporal conditions that, for Kant, belong solely to the structure of human experience. Let us grant further that the Old Ones may have features *permanently* outstripping human intelligence, in a way that the Higgs boson may not. Even so, this would be the result not of the transcendental structure of human finitude, but only of our relative stupidity. The game of chess is not 'noumenal' for dogs through their inability to grasp it, and neither is Sanskrit grammar for a deranged adult or a three-year-old. In 'The Whisperer in Darkness', the Old Ones even invite humans to become initiated into their larger view of the world:

Do you realise what it means when I say that I have been on thirty-seven different celestial bodies – planets, dark stars, and less definable objects – including eight outside our galaxy and two outside the curved cosmos of space and time? [...] The visitors are eager to know men of knowledge like yourself, and

to shew them the great abysses that most of us have had to dream about in fanciful ignorance.<sup>11</sup>

Humans prepare to reach these deeper abysses, neither through Heideggerian *Angst* nor a mystical experience that leaps beyond finitude and reduces philosophy to straw, but through purely medical means: 'My brain has been removed from my body by fissions so adroit that it would be crude to call them surgery.'<sup>12</sup> The great horror of Lovecraft's universe lies not in some sublime infinite that no finite intelligence can fully grasp, but in the invasion of the finite world by finite malignant beings. For all the limits imposed on our intellect by Kant, he leaves us reassured that the finite and phenomenal world is insulated from horror, governed and structured by our own familiar categories. Far more troubling is Lovecraft's subversion of the finite world: no longer a kingdom led by innocuous rational beings, but one in which humans face entities as voracious as insects, who use black magic and telepathy while employing mulatto sailors as worse-than-terrorist operatives.

The Old Ones are anything but noumenal. Noumenal beings scarcely have need of buildings, whether Euclidean or otherwise. Noumenal beings are not dissected on the tables of polar explorers, do not mine for rocks in Vermont, and have no purpose mastering Arabic and Syriac dialects to consult the writings of medieval wizards. They would never speak in physical voices, not even with 'the drone of some loathsome, gigantic insect ponderously shaped into the articulate speech of an alien species [...] [with] singularities of timbre, range, and overtones [placing it

11. Ibid., 468.

12. Ibid.

wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life.<sup>13</sup> Michel Houellebecq, in a brilliant study of Lovecraft,<sup>14</sup> is correct to emphasize his absolute materialism: ‘What is Great Cthulhu? An arrangement of electrons, like us. Lovecraft’s terror is rigorously material. But, it is quite possible, given the free interplay of cosmic forces, that Great Cthulhu possesses abilities and powers to act that far exceed ours. Which, *a priori*, is not particularly reassuring at all.’<sup>15</sup>

The terror of Lovecraft is not a noumenal horror, then, but a horror of phenomenology. Humans cease to be master in their own house. Science and letters no longer guide us toward benevolent enlightenment, but may force us to confront ‘notions of the cosmos, and of [our] own place in the seething vortex of time, whose merest mention is paralysing’, and ‘impose monstrous and unguessable horrors upon certain venturous [humans]’.<sup>16</sup> Confronted with the half-human offspring of the Old Ones, even the political Left will endorse the use of concentration camps: ‘Complaints from many liberal organizations were met with long confidential discussions, and representatives were taken on trips to certain camps and prisons. As a result, these societies became surprisingly passive and reticent’.<sup>17</sup>

13. Ibid., 434.

14. Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. D. Khazeni, Introduction by Stephen King. (San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005).

15. Ibid., 32.

16. Ibid., 719. From ‘The Shadow Out of Time.’

17. Ibid., 587. From ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth.’

To expand on a passage cited earlier:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position within, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.<sup>18</sup>



18. Ibid., 167.

Though ostensibly Kantian on a first reading, nothing could be less Kantian than this passage in its call for barriers to enlightenment, and its placement of ‘terrifying vistas’ not in some transcendent sublime, but in the electrons that form the pulpy torso of Great Cthulhu.

### THE WEIRDNESS OF OBJECTS

The literary critic Harold Bloom shares the following anecdote:

Some years ago, on a stormy night in New Haven, I sat down to reread, yet once more, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* [...] I wanted to start all over again with the poem: to read it as though I had never read it before, indeed as though no one had ever read it before me [...] And while I read, until I fell asleep in the middle of the night, the poem’s initial familiarity began to dissolve [...] Although the poem is a biblical epic, in classical form, the peculiar impression it gave me was what I generally ascribe to literary fantasy or science fiction, not to heroic epic. *Weirdness* was its overwhelming effect.<sup>19</sup>

Science fiction is found not only in ‘science fiction’, but in great literature of any sort. More generally, Bloom contends that ‘one mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a *strangeness* that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncracies.’<sup>20</sup> Although Bloom has little time for philosophy, which he views as cognitively less original than literature, his standard of canonical achievement seems equally valid for

philosophical work. If there is one feature that unites the great works of philosophy, it is surely their inability to be fully assimilated, or their tendency to become such a given that we are blinded to their strangeness. Though Plato and Kant can be seen as restrictive establishment figures, their works are saturated with deviant images and nearly fantastic concepts; they exceed all possible interpretation, resist all attempted summary, and appeal to readers of any nationality or political orientation. The education of young philosophers builds on these works as on bedrock. And they come alive only when some gifted interpreter rediscovers their strangeness.

Pressing further, it also seems evident that the strangeness of works comes less from the works as a whole than from the weirdness of the personae that fill them, whether in literature, philosophy, or science. Though Don Quixote and Lear’s Fool appear solely in literary works, they are no more reducible to extant plot lines than our friends are exhaustively grasped by our dealings with them. Characters, in the broadest sense, are *objects*. Though we only come to know them through specific literary incidents, these events merely hint at a character’s turbulent inner life – which lies mostly outside the work it inhabits, and remains fully equipped for sequels that the author never produced. If a lost Shakespearean tragedy were discovered, dealing with the apparent suicide of the Fool (who disappears without explanation from the existing text of *King Lear*), the same Fool would have to be present in the new work, however unexpected its speeches. The same is true of philosophical concepts, which must also be viewed as characters or objects. While recent philosophy

19. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 24-5. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004). Italics added.

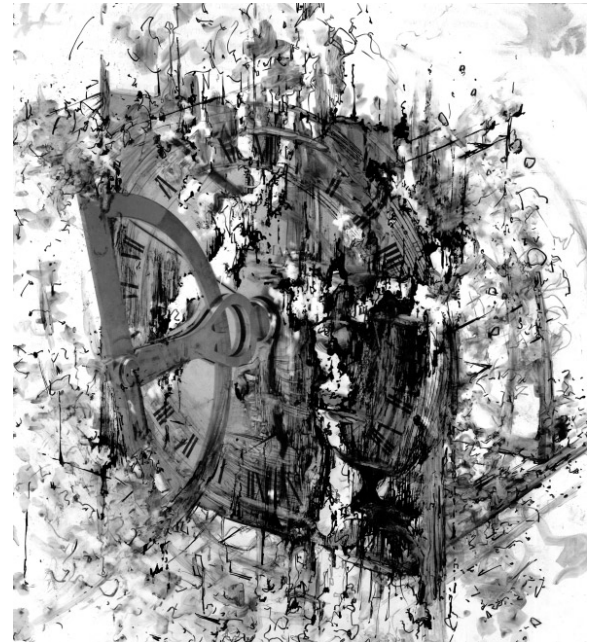
20. *Ibid.*, 4.

insists on precise definitions of every term, a genuine philosophical concept always eludes such precision. We could list the known features of Leibniz's monads in a laminated chart, yet the list includes contradictions, and surely leaves us hungry for more. The same holds true of argon in chemistry or the string in physics. A thing cannot be reduced to the definitions we give of it, because then the thing would change with each tiny change in its known properties, as Kripke has sharply objected.<sup>21</sup> A good rule of thumb is as follows: *unless* a character gives rise to different interpretations, *unless* a scientific entity endures changed notions of its properties, *unless* a philosopher is entangled in contradictory assertions over one and the same concept, *unless* a new technology has unforeseen impact, *unless* a politician's party is one day disappointed, *unless* a friend is able to generate and experience surprises, then we are not dealing with anything very real. We will be dealing instead with useful surface qualities, not with objects. Let 'object' refer to any reality with an autonomous life deeper than its qualities, and deeper than its relations with other things. In this sense, an object is reminiscent of an Aristotelian primary substance, which supports different qualities at different times. Socrates can laugh, sleep, or cry at various moments while still remaining Socrates – which entails that he can never be exhaustively described or defined.

My thesis is that objects and weirdness go hand in hand. An object partly evades all announcement through its qualities, resisting or subverting efforts to identify it with any surface. It is that which exceeds any of the qualities, accidents, or relations that can be ascribed to it: an 'I know

21. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996).

not what', but in a positive sense. Against frequent efforts to dismiss objects as fantasies assembled by humans from a pre-given surface of experienced contents, I contend that reality is object-oriented. Reality is made up of nothing but substances – and they are *weird* substances with a taste of the uncanny about them, rather than stiff blocks of simplistic physical matter. Contact with reality begins when we cease to reduce a thing to its properties or to its effect on other things. The difference between objects and their peripheral features (qualities, accidents, relations) is



absolute. Though this thesis is deeply classical, it cannot possibly be 'reactionary', since the objects of which I speak resist all reduction to dogma, and in fact are the only force in the world capable of doing so.

### INTENTIONAL OBJECTS

Few will object to the term 'weird realism' as a description of Lovecraft's outlook. *Weird Tales* was the periodical that spawned his career, and 'weird fiction' the term most often used for his own writings. Lovecraft was opposed to realism in the literary sense of James or Zola, their minute descriptions confined to the subtleties of human life. Yet he seems like a realist in the philosophical sense, hinting at dark powers and malevolent geometries subsisting well beyond the grasp of human life. By contrast, Edmund Husserl seems to be neither weird, nor a realist, and even looks like the opposite: a 'non-weird antirealist'. No reader, however emotionally unstable, is terrified by Husserl's works. Even in his life history, the sufferings we find stem from personal and political burdens, not from the family strain of madness that paralyzed the young Lovecraft and destroyed his parents. Moreover, when phenomenology is critiqued or abandoned, this is usually because of its wholehearted idealism. All of phenomenology results from a decision to 'bracket' the world, suspending reflection on real waves, genes, and chemicals in favor of what lies entirely within human consciousness. Ironically, this point has led some to compare Husserl with Kant as well. Here the comparison fails yet again, but for the opposite reason: while Lovecraft's monsters are too shallow to be noumenal, Husserl's intentional objects are too deep to be purely phenomenal.

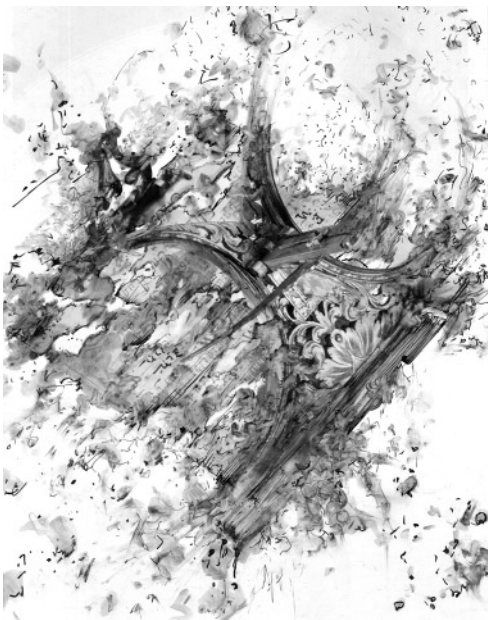
Husserl often proclaimed his motto: 'to the things themselves'. Though the phrase is partly misleading, it should be taken more seriously by those realists who find little of value in his thought. The first step is to remember that Husserl's 'things themselves' are obviously not meant in the Kantian sense. His bracketing of nature leaves him with an immanent world of pure experience. Description (not *explanation*, as with realists) is taken to be the sole philosophical method. Furthermore, there is no room in Husserl for real things that might be viewed directly by God and that lie outside the parameters of human access to the world. All of this might seem to lead to a mere flattening of the noumenal into a special case of the phenomenal, as found in Fichte and his heirs. In his ontology, Husserl would seem to belong to the tradition of German Idealism; his own student Heidegger sometimes makes this claim, hinting vaguely that Husserlian phenomenology is the same basic project as Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Some observers might even be seduced by the recurrence of the term 'phenomenology' in both Husserl and Hegel.

But despite Husserl's fixation on the immanent world of appearance, he injects a dose of obstinate reality into the immanence. This occurs through his notion of intentional objects. The principle of intentionality is well-known: every mental act has some object, whether it be thinking, indicating, wishing, judging, or hating. This principle has not been correctly understood. It does not mean that Husserl somehow escapes idealism: his intentional objects remain purely immanent, and must not be confused with real forces unleashed in the world. The trees I perceive, the food I enjoy, or the swindlers I despise, remain phenomenal

entities. After all, their real existence is bracketed, so that our description of them takes no account of whether they truly exist. Intentionality remains phenomenal. But Husserl's genuine difference from the idealists lies in the fact that intentional reality is made up of *objects*, which play no role at all for Fichte or Hegel. It is said that Husserl would lead his students through painstaking descriptions of a mailbox; perhaps on other days it was lampposts, inkwells, cats, rings, or vases. The point of such descriptions was 'eidetic variation', considering these objects from a variety of angles so as to approach their unvarying *essence* beneath all passing manifestation. The mere fact that intentional objects have an essence should prevent our seeing Husserl as a straightforward idealist, since 'essence' is normally a realist term, linked with the inherent features of a substance apart from all access to it. It is unthinkable that Fichte or Hegel would guide their students through minute descriptions of a specific solid object, since in their current of thinking objects have no stubborn essence of their own. 'Essence', for Hegel, is sublated into the higher unity of the concept, and Hegelians even like to accuse later continentals of a fixation on essence. By contrast, though Husserl brackets the world in order to focus on an immanent field of consciousness, the ego is not entirely master in this immanent realm. Cats and lampposts resist our first approach, demanding patient labours if their essence is to be gradually approached. While the shadows in Heidegger's thought lie buried beneath perception, Husserl's mysteries riddle the field of perception itself. Yet both thinkers allow for secrets to be harboured in the core of the things, and this is what separates them from idealism. Despite their regrettable focus on human reality, Husserl and Heidegger are object-oriented philosophers.

In one sense Husserl's obvious rival is psychologism, which holds that logical laws have only psychological validity. Husserl assaults this position in his massive prologue to the *Logical Investigations*, concluding that logic is objective through its ideal validity within the phenomenal realm. But an equally important rival is British Empiricism. *Logical Investigations* II is a detailed critique of the positions of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. For all the differences between these three classic figures, it is safe to portray them as allied in advance against intentional objects. What comes first for the empiricists are isolated *qualities*, sometimes known as 'impressions.' By contrast, the tradition of phenomenology begins not with qualities, but with phenomenal *objects*. While the British school holds that objects are a bundle produced through the habit of linking diverse qualities together (Hume), or by imagining that hidden powers underlie qualities already seen (Locke), phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty insist on beginning with the total *Gestalt* before any reduction to discrete tones and hues. For phenomenology, the slamming door and the black fountain pen precede their qualities, which gain sense only through a relative enslavement to those objects. Herein lies the greatness of phenomenology, which is more empirical than the empiricists. Experience is not of 'experienced contents', but of objects; isolated qualities are found not in the world we experience, but only in the annals of empiricism.

In *Logical Investigations* V, the rival is Husserl's own teacher Brentano, whether fairly or not. If Brentano held that all mental acts are grounded in some sort of presentation, Husserl twisted the formulation slightly, countering that



all mental acts are *object-giving*. The difference is subtle, but fateful. A presentation seems to put all its contents on the same footing. To represent a globe or a tower is to witness a specific configuration of colors, textures, shadows, and physical co-ordinates. But if we see experience as object-giving rather than presentational, we shift our focus toward the essential nucleus of the perception, stripping the paint and confetti from its outer shell through eidetic variation. And here we find the crucial difference between Husserl's intentional objects and the real objects of realist philosophers. Real objects, which play no role in the bracketed thinking

of Husserl, subsist apart from their relations to anything else; no reality could be independent if it were generated by efforts to perceive or influence it. In this sense, it seems obvious that real objects must partly withhold themselves from all perception, description, registration, or cataloguing of their traits. A substance simply is what it is, and exceeds the endless summation of qualities that can be ascribed to it. But strangely enough, this is not true of Husserl's intentional objects, where an inverse relation holds. Without belabouring a point made elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> whereas real objects taunt us with endless withdrawal, intentional objects are always already present. A real tree would be deeper than anything that can be said or known about it, but the tree of intentional experience is entirely present from the start – it is always a genuine element of experience, affecting my decisions and my moods. If the real tree is never present enough, the intentional tree is always *excessively* present, its essence accompanied by the noisy peripheral detail that eidetic variation needs to strip away. The real object 'fire' is able to scald, burn, boil, melt, and crack other real objects, while the intentional object 'fire' has a very different function: it merely unifies a shifting set of profiles and surfaces whose various flickerings never affect its ideal unity. Real objects hide; intentional objects are merely weighed down with trains of sycophantic qualities, covering them like cosmetics and jewels.

22. See 'On Vicarious Causation', in **COLLAPSE II**, and *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

## THE WEIRDNESS OF HUSSERL

The strangest defect of the books that Husserl published during his lifetime lies in how few descriptions they actually contain. Whatever he may have done in the classroom, one scours his principal works in vain for more than a handful of concrete examples. Husserl seemed content, in his major published writings, with hesitant manifestoes for phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty and Lingis, heirs of greater stylistic gifts, were left to put the method to the test. Consider the case of some massive artifact – say, a hotel complex such as the Nile Hilton, in my adopted home city. The phenomenologist might see it as follows: The hotel is not an arbitrary conglomerate pieced together from flecks of color and sound. What we first encounter is the hotel as a whole, its visible profiles all joined in allegiance to the total reality of the object. Observers may disagree over the exact boundaries of the facility, over where its style begins and ceases to reign, but all will agree that the hotel is present in consciousness as a unit. The various doors, plants, gates, windows, and guards are clearly imbued with a kind of hotel-being, since all would strike us quite differently if stripped from this zone and encountered elsewhere. We now circle the hotel, soaking up the feel of its various entryways: grand entrance in front, dusty two-guard access in back, glamorous terraces when viewed from the south at a distance, and grim windowless façade to the north. We explore the interior, passing from food court to travel agencies to weight room to rooftop lounge, finally knocking on random doors and asking to examine individual rooms. Never in these movements do we see the whole of the Hilton, yet never do we lose the sense of a general *style* to

which the individual scenes belong. It is not important that moths and beetles would not also see it as a ‘hotel’, since we are dealing here not with objective reality, but only with our human *intention* of the hotel as a unified whole. Normally, we make no separation between an intentional object and the surface features through which it is announced. Though we only see one face of the hotel at a time, the presence of hotel and surface seem to be simultaneous, and joined together without fissure.

Yet this intimate bond between object and quality is an illusion, as both Husserl and Lovecraft are aware. Let’s begin with a Lovecraftian version of the hotel. This requires an attempt to mimic his own literary style – a method of reverent parody that deserves to become a staple of philosophy. The following paragraphs might be found in an unwritten Lovecraft tale, ‘The Nile Hilton Incident’:

Though apparently of recent date, the Nile Hilton is built around strange inner corridors of disturbingly ancient provenance. Its membership in the Hilton chain, meant to reassure travelers from the Occident, conceals grotesque legal maneuvers and deviant managerial practices of a purely local origin, and provides cover for a dubious history long expunged from brochures. The doormen are slumped and sullen in a manner atypical of Egypt, while their complexions speak vaguely of a strange admixture of Aztec and Polynesian blood not consonant with the known history of the city.

Unnoticed by the casual witness, the building itself embodies subtle though monstrous distortions of sound engineering principle. Though the outer walls seem to meet at solid right angles, the hue of the concrete departs from accustomed values in a manner suggestive of frailty or buckling. The gaping airshafts are striking for an edifice of such late construction, and

seem fitted to an age when consumption and leprosy were still in abundance. For unknown reasons, several of the fire escapes would appear to issue beneath the surface of the ground. And though the rear façade displays no evident structural flaws, there is a sense of looming collapse in the area; one arising less from visual clues than from certain peculiarities of sound and odour which the management has refused to acknowledge. It is here that a faint but incessant thumping or scraping noise is combined with a scent joining the aroma of sandalwood to one oddly reminiscent of the corpses of bovines. In response to occasional complaints, the concierge makes ostentatious show of despatching inspectors; yet something in the *rhythm* of his response gives the unwonted impression of deceit.

Presumably, Merleau-Ponty was never a reader of Lovecraft. This is unfortunate, since their methods of description have a great deal in common. Although we normally encounter things clothed in a variety of costumes, we pass silently and directly through these garments to the thing as a whole, which seems to imbue them with its spirit. But in Lovecraft, the relation between a thing and its surface is perturbed by irregularities that resist immediate comprehension, as if the object suffered from a strange disease of the nervous system. In real life, an Egyptian doorman is usually found in a cheerful and careless pose, displaying the typical physiognomy of the southern populations of Aswan and Luxor. To describe him instead as 'slumped and sullen', as displaying racial features of distant or extinguished peoples, and especially to call attention to one's perplexity over these aberrations, leads to a breakdown in the usual immediate bond between the doorman and his qualities. A rare fissure is generated between the object and its traits. Although 'Egyptian

doorman' remains a legitimate element of our experience, he is now a menacing kernel that seems to control his outer features like ghastly marionettes, rather than being immediately fused with them. Merleau-Ponty would agree that the durability of concrete is somehow legible in its colour, though the total emotional and perceptual effect of a wall is normally simultaneous and unified. But to suggest that something is amiss in the expected colour of a wall, something that faintly suggests imminent physical breakdown, is to decompose the usual bond between the phenomenon and the outer forms through which it is announced. Language is also able to hint at depth, at real things lying outside all access to them. Surprisingly, this is not the method of Lovecraft, whose materialism gives him a philosophy rooted in the surface, but one in which the relation between objects and their crusts is rendered problematic. His monsters are not deep in themselves, and function in his stories only to disturb the assumptions of human observers. One can imagine third-person tales of the Old Ones battling in outer space, aeons before the emergence of human beings. Such stories would yield more of fantasy than of horror, since we would miss the gradual awareness of human subordination that provides the Cthulhu mythos with its terror. There is nothing inherently compelling about a humanoid dragon with an octopus for a head; any teenager could draw such a thing, while scaring no-one. The horror comes instead from the declared insufficiency of the description, combined with a literary world in which this monster is a genuine player rather than a mere image. The description is horrific only insofar as it undermines any distinct image: 'If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous

pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be entirely unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.<sup>23</sup> Whatever this 'general outline' may be, the narrator feels that his descriptions are at best 'not entirely unfaithful' to its spirit. But this is the very principle of phenomenological description, whose eidetic reductions never quite grasp the essence of the thing, and which differs from Lovecraft only in its usual avoidance of the theme of existential threat. In both cases, the known link between objects and their properties partially dissolves.



23. Lovecraft, *Tales*, 169. From 'The Call of Cthulhu.'

While there are palpable similarities between Lovecraft and Poe in their preference for moods of horror, too little has been said about their similarities of style. In both authors we find hesitant and flowery wording that not only paints their narrators as frail aesthetes, but effectively stunts the relation between things and their traits. In Poe's tale 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the narrator describes Roderick as having 'a nose of a Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy.'<sup>24</sup> To claim directly that there is a typical Jewish nose with a specific nostril size, or that the character of a person can be read from structures of the skull, would merely make one a racist and a phrenologist. But Poe's strange appeal to unexpected disproportions of nostril and chin manages to disassemble the complex amalgam of surface and inference that silently accompanies every new face. To say that Roderick can bear no sounds except the music of guitars would merely give an eccentric description, not a horrific one. The terror comes instead through Poe's meandering way of depicting the trait: 'there were but peculiar sounds, and those from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.'<sup>25</sup> Roderick's panpsychist theory of inanimate perception might be just a vitalist platitude if stated in a journal article. Yet Poe surrounds the idea with enlivening obstacles: 'His opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under

24. Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 321. (New York: Library of America, 1984.)

25. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 322.

certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization.<sup>26</sup> The phrasing should not be dismissed as belonging to a lost era of florid English style; the circumlocution is deliberate, and creates a gap between object and profile that is concealed in everyday experience. The same holds for the narrator's description of Roderick's macabre painting of an underground tunnel, in which 'certain accessory portions of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth'.<sup>27</sup> And finally, Poe's descriptions of music are as impossibly vague as Lovecraft's stunted polar travel diaries. Foremost among Roderick's improvisations on the guitar is 'a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of von Weber'.<sup>28</sup> If a musicologist were to specify the precise distortions of Roderick's melodies in a report commissioned by psychiatrists, or if we heard a recorded version of the music, the effect would be ruined. The point is not to pin down his exact deviations from mainstream musical practice, but to hint that something is terribly amiss in the relation between the music and its exact tones.

In Lovecraft as in Poe, the horror of things comes not from some transcendent force lying outside the bounds of human finitude, but in a twisting or torsion of that finitude itself. The immediate fusion between a thing and its tangible signals gives way to the detachment of a tortured underlying unit from its outward qualities. In similar fashion, cubist painting renders its figures paradoxically

26. *Ibid.*, 327.

27. *Ibid.*, 325.

28. *Ibid.*, 324.



distinct from the amassing of planes and angles through which they are presented. It is no accident that only certain paintings by Georges Braque seem to approach a notion of what Lovecraftian architecture might look like,<sup>29</sup> and surely no accident that Ortega y Gasset links Husserl with Picasso.<sup>30</sup> That said, we should turn briefly from Lovecraft and Poe to the Husserlian version of cubism.

29. Among other instances, see Braque's 1908 canvas 'House at l'Estaque', best viewed in conjunction with Lovecraft's description of the Antarctic city.

30. José Ortega y Gasset, 'On Point of View in the Arts', trans. P. Snodgrass and J. Frank. In *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), 129-130.

What is most disturbing about intentional objects is that they are both *always* and *never* present. Husserl established that the field of perception is made up of objects, not sense data. Yet hotels, museums, and trees require the most laborious work of eidetic variation to free them of all noise, and even this method never succeeds. The hotel is present from the start, yet we never reach a truly exemplary vision of it, free of environmental accident. Nor are these accidents ever directly present. As soon as we shift our focus from the hotel as a whole to the peripheral dance of light along its façade, we have turned sunbeams or moon-rays into our new intentional object, and the eidetic reduction will now be blocked by further shimmering variations that do not affect the beams or rays as a whole. Intentional objects are everywhere and nowhere; they ‘bubble and blaspheme mindlessly’ at every point in the cosmos. Although vividly present as soon as we acknowledge them, intentional objects express their reality only by drawing neighboring objects into their orbit, and these things in turn are only present by enslaving still others. As Merleau-Ponty first observed, the structure of perception is not obvious in the least. There is no such thing as a directly given experience. Even less directly given would be the real objects lying outside all intentional experience, bracketed by Husserl and hence not considered in this article. Just as Lovecraft’s horror has nothing to do with transcendent things themselves, the horror of phenomenology arises even though all transcendent reality is suspended. Lovecraft’s heroes cannot maintain their faith in the familiar contract between things and their properties, since the creatures they encounter are never quite captured by any list of tentacles or strange vocal timbres. A weird

reading of phenomenology (the only possible reading) loses faith not just in the given sense data of empiricists, but even in the clean separation between objects and qualities. What is present is never objects or qualities, but only a fission between one object and the satellite objects bent by its gravitational field, even if everyday perception deadens us to this fact.

Without having even considered the status of *real* objects, we find that intentional objects already have a weirdness that eludes definition. It is often falsely held that phenomena have definite qualitative features, which is the position of empiricism, not of Husserl. It is held even more widely, and just as falsely, that real objects must have definite material features and exact positions in space-time. These views form the apparent motive for recent philosophies of ‘the virtual.’ If real and intentional objects are both somehow actual, both fully enshrined in the world in a manner that could in principle be described, then both seem fully inscribed in a context or web of mutual interrelations. And since true realism requires that things be considered apart from all relations, the only solution would be to shift the scene of realism away from concrete objects and phenomena towards disembodied attractors, topological invariants, or other virtual entities, all of them outstripping any possible embodiment in specific entities.<sup>31</sup>

What this step misses is the already abominable weirdness of concrete objects, whether real or phenomenal. But Lovecraft and Husserl do not miss this point. Though the materialism of Lovecraft and the idealism of Husserl

31. See especially Manuel DeLanda’s wonderful *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. (London: Continuum, 2002).

## COLLAPSE IV

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might seem to divide them, these doctrines go hand in hand. For we are never really sure just what an object is. Whether we define it as nothing more than electrons, or as just a shape present in consciousness, we replace the fathomless reality of things with an intellectual model of what their underlying reality ought to be. In this sense, realism tends to oppose the outlooks of Lovecraft and Husserl. Yet in a different sense, they save the weirdness of objects from its neglect by philosophies of the virtual. While such philosophies may deserve admiration for insisting on realism against any idealism or narrowly physical materialism, they are wrong to hold that objects are always utterly specific. Lovecraft (surprisingly) and Husserl (unsurprisingly) remain fixed on a material/phenomenal plane that prevents them from being full-blown metaphysical realists. But at least they grasp the weird tension in the phenomena themselves, always in tense dissolution from their qualities. It is a one-legged realism that misses the genuine hiddenness of things, but a weird realism nonetheless.

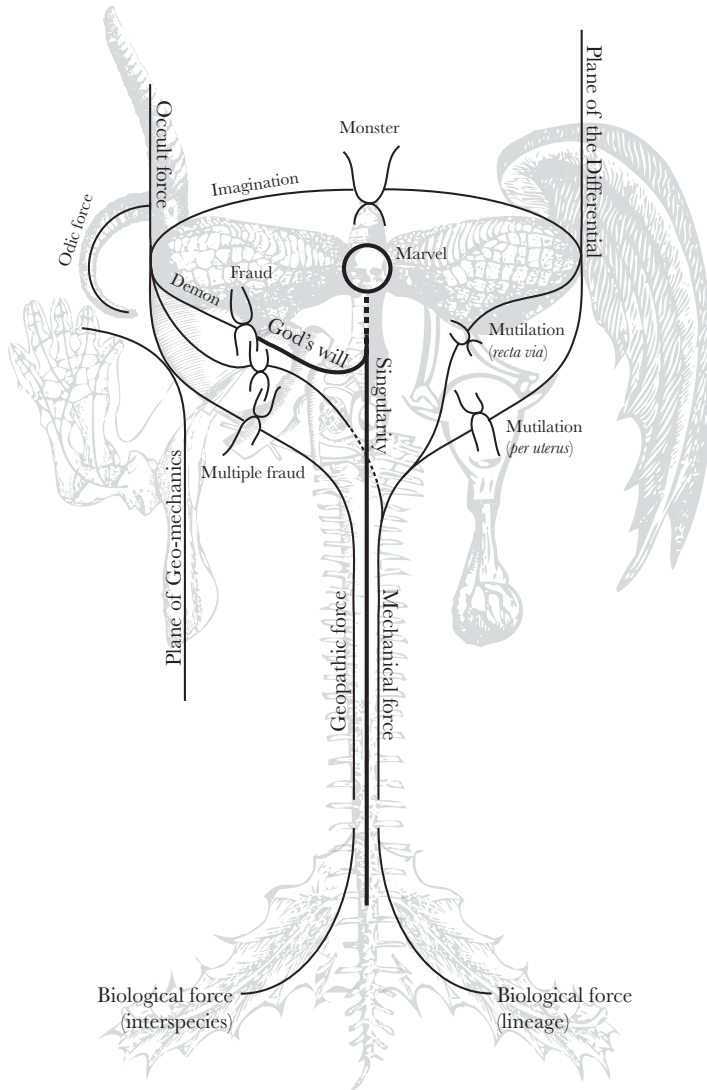


## Arbor Deformia

Kristen Alvanson



Among manuscripts published and treatises written on teratology and cryptozoology, one work has been more influential than others: Ambroise Paré's *Des monstres et des prodiges*, written in the sixteenth century. Paré was a distinguished French surgeon, the royal surgeon of Henry II, Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III. *Monsters and Prodigies* was penned by Paré at the peak of the sixteenth-century teratological frenzy inherited from the occult and medical preoccupations of the Middle Ages. Written toward the later stages of his professional life as a surgeon, *Monsters and Prodigies* is a monstrous paean to arborescent models of taxonomy. For Paré, as a scientist who believed that his teratologic treatise should be incorporated with his works on surgery and practical medicine, the problem of taxonomy is more twisted and deformed than monsters and deformities themselves. Problems inherited from the Middle Ages concerning theological riddles, occult forces and fantastic fauna cannot easily be reconciled with Renaissance solutions. Therefore, for Paré what is deemed as truly monstrous is taxonomy itself: *How is it possible to build a monstrous order or taxonomy to bring all fiends, rogue beings, demonic deformities and divine marvels back into the fold?*



'Taxonomy as monstrous', 'hierarchy as deformity', 'category as schizophrenic order' and 'tree as *lusus naturae*' could all stand as partial characterisations of Paré's teratological system. In order to tackle the enigma of deformities, monsters and prodigies once and for all, Paré creates a parapsychical model in which (I) Singularity, (II) planes and (III) forces are the main components from which to concoct a taxonomic system. Forces derive from different fields or spheres and vary from occult-paranormal to mechanical-physical forces; in Paré's system, most of the taxonomies evolve out of interactions between these elements. These interactions include the application of forces to planes, the fusion of forces with each other or the conflict of certain forces with singularity. However, the force of Godhead or singularity is capable of developing taxonomies on its own. These elements can produce thirteen causes which incite abnormalities. Further classifying, Paré divides these causes into another four groups based on which deformities are identified: (i) marvellous causes, (ii) monstrous causes, (iii) mutilating causes and finally (iv) fraudulent causes. Marvellous causes are those which belong to the direct intervention of God and are divided into (1) wrath and (2) glory of God. Monstrous causes originate from the fusion of different forces or the application of different forces to certain planes; they are (3) too many seeds, (4) too little seed and (5) maternal imagination during pregnancy. Mutilations are mostly brought forth by the application of mechanical forces either directly to the embryo or through the womb; the rest originate from biological forces which themselves are divided into two sources, interspecies and hereditary. Mutilations include (6) deformity or smallness of the womb, (7) bodily postures of the mother during pregnancy, (8) unnatural pressure,



blows or even a blast of air to the womb, (9) hereditary or accidental illnesses, (10) rotten seed, (11) mingling of seeds belonging to different species. The fourth category of causes, fraudulent causes, are strictly related to occult forces: (12) through the artifice of wicked beggars, (13) demons and the Devil himself. Among these thirteen causes, 11 and 13 can form a categorical alliance – causes by unnatural conceptions (13a). The causes involving seeds (3, 4, 10, 11) can merge together to compose yet another offshoot, causes by unnatural seeds (13b). In this manner, Paré continues to add more branches, stems, branchlets, twigs and unnatural fruits to his taxonomy. Although Paré briefly touches on African and oceanic monsters, he emphasizes that the origin of monsters should be left hidden, referring to the cryptogenic essence of the monstrous.

The *Arbor Deformia* (see p.368) is a schematic designed after the Paréan system of teratological taxonomy. Taking taxonomy as the monstrous idea inclusive of all monsters and deformities, the *Arbor Deformia* is an arborescent model in the tradition of the early trees of knowledge, elements, demons and celestial bodies. The *Arbor Deformia* follows the tradition of arborescent distributions where the idea of the tree is the ratio of two operations, contraction and expansion, represented by two folds, roots and branches. In early arborescent models the tree is not a dichotomous totality but a proportional relation between the underground and elevated activities; it is also the perpetuation of asymmetries or deformities in symmetry or form. The non-dichotomous relation between the root and the branch is typified by the trunk as the middle-ground part of the model. Given that the tree is a ratio between underground and elevated activities, it can be infinitely deformed without losing its

defining outlines. As a part of the ratio between roots and branches, new changes can be made within the existing range which is marked by the two poles, roots and branches. This enormous capacity for deformation is exemplified in the image of hollow trees. Hollow trees frequently appear in illustrations and paintings of the *Grotteschi* style, Arabesque-inspired ornamental engravings of the sixteenth century, not to mention the dead elm trees that feature in Italian Renaissance paintings. A thirteenth-century engraving from the *Ornamentale Vorlage-Blätter* made by the Flemish sculptor and draughtsman Cornelis Floris II depicts a tree which is not a tree, but a sport of nature. Alluding to the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, Floris' tree is in the shape of a fruit bursting open with demons, monsters and serpents. It is a hollowness which only in appearance bears the burden of its tree-ness.

New forces and planes have been added to *Arbor Deformia* to include those causes of deformities which are absent in Paré's taxonomy. *Arbor Deformia* is comprised of five forces and two planes. Forces include (1) hereditary biological forces, (2) inter-specific biological forces, (3) mechanical forces, (4) occult forces, and (5) geopathic forces. The plane of the differential and the plane of geo-mechanics are the receptive planes for forces. The plane of geo-mechanics is not directly involved in producing deformities and monsters, but connects two different forces which can cause abnormalities: The plane of the differential expresses the embryonic stage of cell differentiation. A blow is a mechanical force; when it is applied to the womb during the embryonic differentiation of cells it can cause a deformity in the fetus and consequently, the newborn. For example, a mechanical shock transmitted to the limb buds





can later cause the baby to have seven toes on each foot and no elbows, because the limb buds contain in themselves the ideas of toes and elbows which will later differentiate into the actual toes and elbows. Excessive or unwanted application of mechanical forces to the embryo may cause a group of deformities called mutilations. In *Arbor Deformia*, marvels are created by singularities such as the direct intervention of God. The cases of deformities or inversion of internal organs which are not lethal are usually associated with the direct intervention of God and considered marvels. Jean Macé, a seventy-two-year-old soldier, was dissected after his death and found to be a perfect epitome of *situs inversus*, with his heart and spleen being on the right, the liver on the left. Joseph-Guichard Duverney, the French anatomist, declared the case a marvel because the original internal deformity was originally situated in the performed germ in such a way as not to cause death or mutilation.

Occult forces include a wide range of influences and emanations including imagination, electricity, odic and magnetic force, demonic influences, etc. The womb, according to Renaissance teratological models, is the organ which hungers for external forces.<sup>1</sup> Any ambiguous emotion or obscure force directed toward a woman will be absorbed and picked up by the womb. The classic medieval example of the occult influence of imagination upon the embryo is ‘a woman looking upon an ape too attentively during her pregnancy and as a result giving birth to a baby with thick black hair covering the entire body and even inside the mouth’. Occult forces can conflict or join with other forces to cause deformities. For this reason, occult

1. According to Renaissance texts, if the female seed does not fruit, it will ferment by its own hunger, rot and turn into vermin which will devour or disfigure the womb (cf. Isabella de Moerloose’s account in her autobiography, 1695).

## COLLAPSE IV

forces are mostly involved with fraudulent deformities. For example, electricity as an occult force can combine with a mechanical force and give rise to a fraud. A mother bat warmly breastfeeding its baby on an electricity wire has been electrocuted. The mechanical haptic bond between the mother and the baby has been captured by electricity; and hence, a motherly contact has been deformed to a monstrous fraud (see facing page). Occult forces can also work upon themselves to produce further frauds. A person who has spent a long time in absolute darkness can permeate a spectral image joined to his torso or the back of his head. Such spectral frauds might be in the form of a second head, a shape-shifting and conjoined twin, etc. Such auric or proto-ectoplasmic frauds are usually associated with odic,<sup>2</sup> magnetic or other occult emanations. Occult forces are able to conflict with singularity or alter the will of God into a fraud. A succubus can have sex with a man as he sleeps, turning his dream of being a man to the awakening of a water beetle.

In Far Eastern, especially Chinese, teratology, monsters can come to life through the combination of earthly forces and occult influences. A geopathic force or stress is usually defined in terms of harmful earth rays connected

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2. Odic force is a name given in the nineteenth century by Carl von Reichenbach to a hypothetical vital force, a life flux which emanates from vital substances and is similar to electricity and magnetism. Odic force manifests itself most often in the mouth, the hands, the forehead and the occiput and has different laws of distribution than those of electricity: 'Odylo-luminous phenomena of great extent appearing over metal plates (electrified or unisolated) do not adhere to the metallic surface, as the electrical currents do, but flow over it as the aurora borealis does over the earth. Odylic currents do not flow merely from the points but also from the sides of bodies, even of jagged bodies, e.g. large crystals: electricity prefers a point for exit.' (Carl von Reichenbach)





to the earth's electromagnetic fields, fault lines, minerals, underground caves, etc. These forces can combine with occult forces which influence the plane of geo-mechanics and cause particular deformities. A boy at the onset of puberty who walks along and over leylines or other energy lines can be influenced by earthly-occult radiations which might drive the boy mad or increase the rate of bone growth, enlarging the head or putting an end to his overall growth. In Chinese teratology, there have been cases of pregnant women who, after being exposed to a particular location such as a former altar for sacrificing humans or a house with a dark history, have given birth to extremely deformed babies. Since these deformities are caused by more than one obscure force they are categorized as the group of multiple frauds. The last two forces, the hereditary and inter-specific biological forces, make the organic fold of the tree over which non-organic forces grow and blossom. Unnatural conceptions between pigs and men or ants and lions are among inter-specific biological deformities. While deformation by a corrupt seed belongs to the hereditary forces or forces associated with the lineage. *Arbor Deformia* shows the proportion of its branches to its roots, of the inorganic arms to the organic appendages. Monsters, frauds, marvels, mutilations and multiple frauds are the fruits of this proportional relation.













### Notes on Contributors and Acknowledgements

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An American artist living and working in the Middle East, Alvanson has been published in John Russell's anthology *Frozen Tears 3* and has previously contributed to **COLLAPSE**. She is currently exploring the threefold of Middle East, Women and Fabric in a project entitled *Cosmic Drapery* and working on a book entitled *Lessons in Schizophrenia*.

#### **JAKE AND DINOS CHAPMAN**

The collaborative works of brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman remain among the most consistently radical and invigorating forces in contemporary art. They have exhibited internationally and were recently the subject of a major retrospective at the Tate Liverpool in 2006-7 (See *Bad Art for Bad People*, ed. C. Grunenberg and T. Barson, London: Tate Publishing, 2006).

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**MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ**

As well as being the author of several bestselling novels, including *Atomised* (trans. F. Wynne, London: Heinemann, 2000) – filmed by Oscar Roehler in 2006 – and *Platform* (trans. F. Wynne, London: Heinemann, 2002), Michel Houellebecq has published several books of poetry (collected in *Poésies*, Paris: J'ai Lu, 2000) and various essays – notably his 1991 book on H. P. Lovecraft *Against the World, Against Life* (trans. D. Khazeni, San Francisco, CA: Believer Books, 2005). Houellebecq's most recent novel was *The Possibility of an Island* (2005, trans. G. Bowd, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007). He now lives and works in Ireland.

**OLEG KULIK**

The practice of Oleg Kulik, who has been internationally acclaimed as one of the most radical artists working today, encompasses extraordinary live actions, manipulated photography and other media. Much of his past work has been concerned with exploring the subject of animal as human being or animal as a non-anthropomorphic Other. A book documenting Kulik's work since 1993 accompanied his 2001 performance in the UK (*Oleg Kulik: Art Animal*, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery 2001). He is represented by XL Gallery, Moscow (xlgallery@gmail.com).

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Thomas Ligotti has gathered a dedicated cult following and garnered critical acclaim and awards for his fiction, which includes the collections *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Random House, 2008), *Noctuary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994) and *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1989). He is currently working on a volume of theoretical writings entitled *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*.

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China Miéville is an author of weird fiction. He has won the Arthur C Clarke Award twice, for his novels *Perdido Street Station* (London: Macmillan, 2000) and *Iron Council* (London: Macmillan, 2004). His other books include a collection of short fiction, *Looking for Jake* (London: Macmillan, 2005), and a book for younger readers, *Un Lun Dun* (London: Macmillan, 2007). His non-fiction includes *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (London: Haymarket, 2005).

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Reza Negarestani is a philosopher working in Shiraz, Iran. He is the author of *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: Re.Press, forthcoming 2008).

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**RAFANI**

The art collective Rafani have exhibited extensively in the Czech Republic and elsewhere since their founding in 2000 by four students from Prague's Academy of Fine Arts. Their constitution states that they 'build on the everyday experience of wide social strata; we analyse it and look for points that go beyond the sphere of the mundane. With a conscious art form we attempt to reflect their interests, dreams, fears, and ambitions. What we express is in harmony with their ideas; we speak the language of bitter truth.'

**STEVEN SHEARER**

Steven Shearer is an artist who lives and works in Vancouver, Canada. Shearer exhibits internationally, with recent exhibitions including solo presentations at the IKON Gallery, Birmingham, The Power Plant, Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, and De Appel, Amsterdam, most recently showing at the New Museum, New York in a two person exhibition entitled *Double Album*.

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**TODOSCH**

Perhaps best known for his attempt to attack the 2000 Hanover Expo with a paramilitary convoy, artist Thorsten Schlopsnies, AKA Todosch, has also exhibited sculpture and graphic work, and has been involved in various musical projects, as well as staging live actions. See <http://todosch.felix-werner.net/>

\*

*Translation of 'The Spectral Dilemma' by Robin Mackay.*

*Translation of Michel Houellebecq's work by Robin Mackay, with thanks to Armelle Menard Seymour and Delphine Grass.*

*Thanks to Ivan Mecl of Divus for his help and assistance with regard to the work of Rafani and Todosch.*

*Thanks to Serge Khripun and Elina Selina of XL Gallery, Moscow, and for their co-operation with regard to the work of Oleg Kulik.*

*Thanks to Katherine Gardner of House of Chapman for her help with regard to the work of Jake and Dinos Chapman, and to Jake and Dinos for their enthusiasm and co-operation.*

*Thanks to Ilsa Colsell of Stuart Shave Modern Art for her assistance with regard to the work of Steven Shearer, and to Steven himself for his attentive co-operation.*

*Thanks to Damian Veal for his tireless proofreading and editorial assistance. Special thanks to Ruth and Donald Mackay for being a potent antidote to the horrors of life and editorship.*



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Toula Nicolacopoulos

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**Hegel's Jena Philosophy of Nature - 'The Organics'**  
G.W.F. Hegel (translated by Erich D. Freiburger)

Never before translated, this part of Hegel's work represents a significant contribution to both Hegelian scholarship and modern philosophy as a whole. This translation consists of 'the Organics' of 1803/4 and 1805/6 from Hegel's early Jena Philosophy of Nature.

## **Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials**

Reza Negarestani

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Sense and Nonsense



'The pendulum of the mind alternates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong.'

Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

'In order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.'

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

'Philosophy must be ontology, it cannot be anything else; but there is no ontology of essence, there is only an ontology of sense.'

Gilles Deleuze, *Review of Logic and Existence*

*Pli* is a journal of philosophy edited and produced by members of the Graduate School of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. *Pli* has no specific set of philosophical concerns but previous issues have tended to focus upon European philosophical traditions, reflecting the interests of the graduate community at Warwick. In particular, *Pli* has published translations of works otherwise unavailable in English by philosophers including Éric Alliez, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, François Laruelle, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Volume 19 is a collection of papers dealing with the issue of sense and nonsense, in particular in relation to notions such as scepticism, immanence, and expression in philosophy, in the work of such thinkers as Wittgenstein and Deleuze. It also contains various articles on or by writers such as Badiou, Lacan, and Maimon, and a number of reviews of recent publications in continental philosophy.

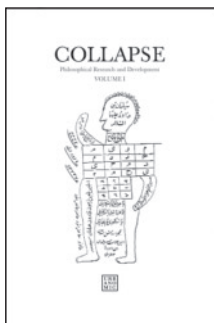
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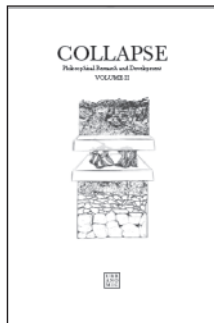
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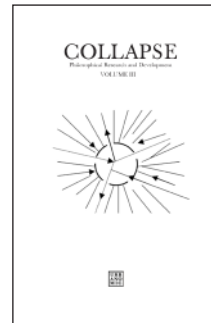
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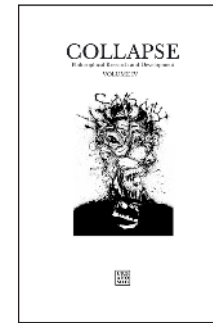
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# COLLAPSE

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## VOLUME IV

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ISBN 978-0-9553087-3-4



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